

the PRACTICAL FARMER

AUTUMN 2024



In This Issue:

Beyond 'Random Acts of Oats'

Connecting Islands of Habitat

Rooted in Collaboration





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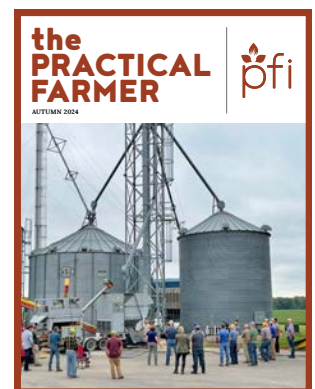
Dairy cows, rapt with interest, gather around Michael Gutschenritter as he tells field day guests the role the cows play at Three Brothers Farm. Michael and his wife, Courtney, held the field day July 16 on their farm in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.

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ON THE COVER:

A group of oat growers gathers on Tom Pyffereon's farm in southern Minnesota. Tom is part of Byron Area Farmers, a unique farmer-led collective of area oat growers who are working together to share knowledge and make it viable to raise a third crop. Read more on page 14. Photo by Martin Larsen.



WHAT WE DO

Practical Farmers of Iowa was founded in 1985 as an organization for farmers. We use farmer-led investigation and information sharing to help farmers practice an agriculture that benefits both the land and people.

OUR MISSION

Practical Farmers of Iowa's mission is equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.

OUR VISION

An Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

OUR VALUES

Welcoming everyone

Farmers leading the exchange of experience and knowledge

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration and community

Resilient farms now and for future generations

Stewardship of land and resources

THE PRACTICAL FARMER

The Practical Farmer is a quarterly magazine published as a benefit of membership in Practical Farmers of Iowa. Through engaging stories and photos, our aim is to share the knowledge and experiences of PFI farmers, build a strong and connected community of members and supporters and celebrate our collective efforts to build resilient farms and communities.

Back issues are available upon request. Unless otherwise noted, articles may be reprinted or adapted if credit is given. Clippings and notice are appreciated.



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Filling Our Cups With Hope

This spring and summer, Practical Farmers staff embarked on a three-part professional development series exploring key aspects of Iowa's agricultural history and the elements that synergize to create resilient farms and communities.

Like our members, PFI staff come from a range of backgrounds. Because of this, through a series of trainings, we wanted to create a common understanding amongst staff of the history of Iowa's landscape, people and agriculture so we can work collaboratively toward Practical Farmers' vision of an Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

Part 1 started with an all-day crash course on the history of Iowa agriculture, from pre-colonization to the present. Albert Lacson, who teaches Native and African American history at Grinnell College, shared how Iowa looked before Europeans arrived. Staff learned about Iowa's unique geographic context within a dynamic transition zone between two adjacent ecosystems, known in biological terms as an ecotone. In this zone, the Midwest's First Peoples built vast, thriving societies and elaborate trade networks intimately linked with a bison economy.

Sharing a passage from author Robert Morrissey's book "People of the Ecotone," Albert helped paint a picture of what this dynamic landscape was like: "Here in the Midwest was a biome-scale transition, the transition between the woodlands of the East and the grasslands of the West. In the heart of this transition, the heart of the Divide, was a special ecology, the tallgrass prairie. Far from monotonous, this landscape was dramatically diverse."

Leaping forward, Matt Liebman, Iowa State University professor emeritus and a PFI lifetime and board member, contrasted that "dramatically diverse" landscape with Iowa's landscape now. Through a series of evocative statistics and graphs, Matt showed how rapidly monocultures of corn and soybeans supplanted the once-ubiquitous practice of multi-cropping and extended rotations on Iowa farms. Emphasizing the impact of that mass conversion, Matt shared one particularly startling statistic: "The caloric content of the U.S. corn crop is now 4.3 times greater than the yearly caloric requirement of the entire U.S. population."

Other speakers guided us through highlights of the social, technological and cultural shifts leading from colonization to the present, including the impact of the 1980s farm crisis and the origins of PFI. Thank you to Albert, Matt, Andy Olson of Tallgrass Prairie Center, Margaret Smith of Albert Lea Seed (and a PFI lifetime member, board member and farmer), changemaker and farmer Denise O'Brien and PFI co-founder Larry Kallem for sharing your wealth of knowledge with us.

Part 2 of our training was all about soils. Lee Burras, soils professor at ISU, shared how Iowa's soils formed, and how variable Iowa soils are. We learned that today's soil profiles are significantly different from their natural state. "I have great hopes PFI can reconnect this," Lee said. "Management changes the profile. That is the intent. Understand it. Own it." Thank you Lee, and Hillary Olson from Natural Resources Conservation Service, for presenting, and demonstrating, soil health principles to us.

In Part 3, staff shifted from the classroom to the field. We boarded a bus to visit and learn from three central Iowa PFI farm businesses:

- **Uncle G's Farm**, a small-scale hog and poultry farm near Ogden, operated by Garin and Kristen Buttermore. Garin shared advice to his younger self: "Focus and start small. Get one system down before you try another one."
- **Iowa Cover Crop**, a full-service cover crop business near Jefferson. Bill and Melissa Frederick and James and Megan Holz explained how their business came to exist and the growth they've experienced. When asked what farm groups can do to help businesses like Iowa Cover Crop, James said, "Don't be too worried about alienating a few people in your base to keep you from working toward the common good."
- **Deal's Orchard**, a highly diversified row crop and specialty crop farm near Jefferson. Jerald, Cindy, Chris and Benji took us on a tour and showed us ways the five-generation farm continues to evolve over the years. In recent years, they've added hard cider to their mix, greatly enhanced their agritourism offerings (it's worth a visit if you haven't been) and just this year planted a high-density orchard.

As usual, this magazine is filled with other stories of innovation and hope, from George Heller and Ethan Book's flocks to Barb Kraus, Kate Prochaska and Clara Muggli-Toyloy's flower co-op, and much more. Please read on to fill your cup, too.

Thank you for the hope and ingenuity you lend to the common good,

Sally Worley

P.S. If you have ideas on how we can change our tactics to better serve you, please let me know!



PFI staff stand in the pumpkin patch at Deal's Orchard as they listen intently to and ask questions of Chris and Jerald Deal on July 9, 2024.

GROW WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

By Martha McFarland

Urban farmers face the same challenges as their rural peers - weather, finding markets, weed and pest control, accessing land and more. But they also face unique constraints. As they seek to farm in cities and towns, these urban growers must run a gauntlet of city, state and county rules, zoning laws and development pressures, all of which can complicate their desire to farm.

Why do they persist? For the PFI members profiled here, connection to land and community drive them to grow within the spaces they've found.

Monika Owczarski | DES MOINES, IOWA

Monika Owczarski of Sweet Tooth Farms grows vegetables on several small plots in the middle of her Des Moines neighborhood. She started the farm in 2016, guided by a desire to reinvigorate a small, neglected city-owned park adjacent to her property while providing food for her community.

In starting the farm, Monika transitioned from gardening in her own backyard to farming for others. "There's a really big learning curve from gardening to scaling up and farming," she says, citing the challenges of prepping the space, working with neighbors and developing markets. Many of her neighbors are immigrant families who want fresh produce and are used to open-air markets. So she started promoting her new farm through conversations and flyers - translated into 10 of the 30 languages spoken in the community.

Within a few years, her farm stand grew into a community space, with people lining up around the block. Through her relationship with Des Moines Parks and Recreation, she received an offer from the city to grow on two other industrial sites. By 2020, Monika was farming a little over 2 acres and had started a

neighborhood farmers market and community "refrigerator," a 24/7 free pantry for those in need. She was also mentoring others and working with local restaurants.

In 2021, the City of Des Moines terminated all agricultural leases on city-owned land to free up potential space for development. The news was "emotionally devastating," Monika says. As she was scrambling to figure out her next move, she received a text from

someone in the neighborhood who offered to sell her a small lot. "We were able to survive because my neighbors felt that trust with me and offered solutions," she says. "They really stepped up, so I didn't have to completely close up shop."

Today Monika continues to grow for her community on a smaller scale, and is frank about the challenges of urban farming. Unlike in rural areas, for instance, she says an urban farmer has to seek permission from zoning boards to build a high tunnel, add waterlines or make other infrastructure improvements. "I think a lot of urban farmers may be struggling at this scale. If we don't have more space to make this bigger, and if I'm paying to do this, this is an expensive hobby at some point."

Why does she persist? "I have such a deep, deep love for this neighborhood," Monika says. "I don't think I have delusions about what I can do, but I am a grateful visitor and admirer of all of these cultures. I think of the five or six grandmas who were just here, picking up produce....I can't put a price on that, but it's so nourishing as a human to have that. That's golden to me."



Monika Owczarski

Lee Goldsmith | GRIMES, IOWA

Lee Goldsmith has also found ways to grow in small spaces thanks to connections within her community. In August 2022, she started Native Legacy Tree and Perennial Nursery, LLC in Grimes, after working for other nurseries for 12 years. On ¼ acre, she grows a variety of native Iowa trees, prairie plants and woodland flowers in containers.

She first connected with Practical Farmers as she sought land to start her business. Working with PFI's farmland access navigators, she received support from someone whose job is to help guide people in their search for land to start or grow a farm. "It was so helpful, the encouragement," Lee says of her land access navigator, "and her advice to tell everyone you know that you're looking for land."

Lee heeded that advice and started asking people in her community. Eventually, those conversations paid off. "I was just talking to a neighbor, and someone he knew had a business with a large lot," Lee says. She now has an informal arrangement with the business owner. "Fortunately, my crops are in containers, so I can pick up and get out if I had to," she says. "But I really thought hard about what kind of an agreement ... would work for him."

Lee's focus on native perennials further complicates the regulatory hurdles. Under the Iowa Department of Revenue's definition, her business is technically not a farm since she grows some plants that aren't table food. But to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, it is. "Wayfinding is tricky," Lee says. "In most cases, I'm an LLC selling a product just like Tupperware." Because of her farm's tiny size, she also doesn't qualify for Iowa's DriftWatch registry, which lets farmers with sensitive crops register their operations so pesticide applicators can take extra care when spraying fields near these sites.

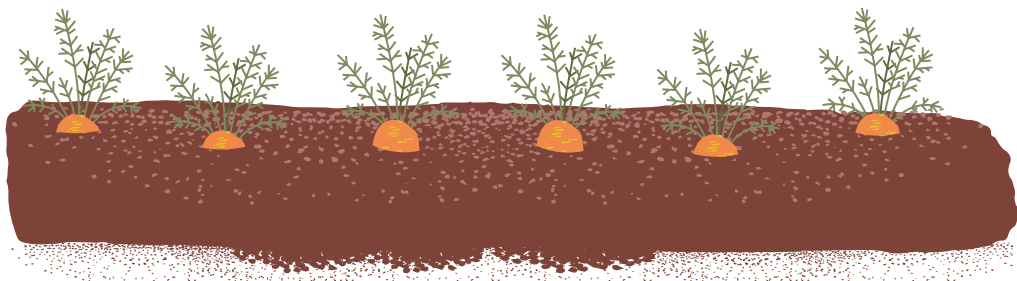
Lee is now looking to expand onto 2 acres. The location needs to be close to her home because she works a second part-time job and must also juggle family life and plant care. Many of her sales are also local. She offers other urban farmers this advice: "Reach out and talk to people. There's an industry of small nursery growers in the state, and I'm finding connection."

(Continued on page 8 →)



Lee Goldsmith





Stephen Hansen | WINTERSSET, IOWA

Stephen Hansen started Magnolia Gardens in his yard in Winterset, Iowa, in 2022 on about one-eighth acre. He grew up in the foster system in Winterset, and was adopted by a family in Greenfield who grew gardens, chickens, sheep, cows and fruit trees. This connection sparked Stephen's interest in food systems.

He initially focused on large retail operations like Whole Foods and large-scale vegetable operations in Michigan and Iowa. But in time, Stephen wanted to think smaller. "There's a lot of waste," he says of those large operations. Authors and influencers like Curtis Stone and Jean-Martin Fortier inspired him to think about starting a smaller-scale farm, and in 2022, he moved back to Iowa, bought the house in Winterset and worked for PFI members Jenny Quiner of Dogpatch Urban Gardens and Dale Raasch of Bridgewater Farm.

Like many beginning farmers rural or urban, land access was one of his biggest barriers to getting started. So the plan was to use as much yard space at his home in Winterset as

possible. "We turned it into gardens, raised compost beds," Stephen says. "We grow a lot of lettuce, beets, carrot, radish, cilantro, dill, herbs – anything that will grow in a 60-day window." In 2022 he and his family started taking vegetables to markets.

Stephen's dream is to expand onto 3-5 acres, in a place where multiple farms can operate together on one piece of land. "My life goal is to meet people around food while helping local food systems," Stephen says. His vision, which he calls "getting local," features an indoor market connecting farmers, bakers, makers and community in one place.

This fall, Stephen and his family are moving to Humansville, Missouri, where his partner Sarah's family farms and lives. "Without my partner's access to land, I would still be looking," Stephen says. He adds that he and Sarah plan to stay connected to their communities in Iowa. "I'm super passionate about seeing that through. It's a busy life, but I have a lot of energy to give to this." ■



Stephen Hansen

Connecting Islands of Habitat

At Native Prairie Bison, Jathan Chicoine and Racheal Ruble are showing how farmers who add habitat can help create vital wildlife corridors in Iowa

By Vanya North

Stepping onto Jathan Chicoine's 180-acre farm just south of Story City, Iowa, feels like traveling back in time.

Windswept prairie grasses roll into mature oak savanna, their branches twisted high towards the sky. Tree-shaded ravines plunge steeply to meet Bear Creek, which meanders through the property. Peppered beneath the thick cover of oaks, a herd of bison takes refuge from the day's rain.

But for Jathan and his wife, Racheal Ruble, this landscape is not merely a relic of the past. It's their vision for a regenerative, interconnected future.

In 2011, Jathan returned to Iowa after 17 years away. During that time, he completed military service in the Navy, traveled the world and pursued his higher education. Now, returning home, he and Racheal wanted to continue being part of something bigger than themselves. In 1993, Jathan's father had purchased the original 67 acres of land Jathan and Racheal are now restoring. Envisioning their larger purpose, the couple told their family they wanted to raise bison and restore native habitat on the land. The family agreed, and in 2012, Jathan and Racheal brought bison from southeast Iowa, welcoming the herd with ceremony back to ancestral land the animals had been absent from for many decades.

Their farm, Native Prairie Bison, was born.

"We recognize the role that bison play in restoring native



Photo by Sara Dielm

ecosystems," Jathan says. "Helping restore bison as a keystone species is at the heart of reclaiming the tallgrass prairie ecosystem."

Wanting to graze their herd in its natural habitat, Jathan and Racheal got to work restoring native ecosystems. In 2013 they added 30 acres to the farm, and in 2014 Jathan and his family transitioned a pasture back to prairie, using seed from a local remnant prairie. In 2018, they purchased the original 67 acres from Jathan's father, along with 28 additional acres.

"Helping restore bison as a keystone species is at the heart of reclaiming the tallgrass prairie ecosystem."

- Jathan Chicoine

Restoration efforts continued. In 2023, Jathan and Racheal used the federal Conservation Reserve Program to convert a 54-acre parcel back to native prairie. Most recently, Jathan is working on an oxbow and wetland restoration project along Bear Creek, which flows into the south branch of the Skunk River.

Their careful expansion and restoration efforts culminated in a big way. The farm's newly restored habitat connects directly to the Skunk River Greenbelt – a 620-acre public area of woodlands, prairie, wetlands and riparian habitat stretching from Story City to Ames – creating one large, interlinked wildlife corridor.

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The Need for Connection

These habitat corridors, which connect wildlife populations separated by human development and activities, are vital for species to thrive. In Iowa, where 99% of the state's native habitat is gone, creating interconnected habitat is a pressing need – and a unique challenge. The prairie once covered 80% of the state, but now makes up less than 1%. More than 85% of Iowa's land is farmed, much of it in monocultures of corn and soybeans. Cities, roads and other development further fragment Iowa's already sparse habitat.

The result is an acute island effect where small pockets of habitat are isolated, making it harder for animals to move safely in search of food, mates and shelter. In Iowa's heavily altered landscape, roadside ditches may serve as important corridors for some species. But they also have limitations. They may be too narrow for some species to functionally use, for instance. Habitat quality may be poor. They can also pose safety hazards if animals must cross roads to access other habitat areas, according to the U.S. Federal Highway Administration.

Various groups in Iowa are working to create more interconnected habitat. At the state level, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' wildlife action plan highlights areas across the state that are prime for creating

bigger habitat zones, which the DNR calls "cores," and wildlife corridors. But with so much agricultural land in Iowa, farmers and landowners like Jathan and Racheal are crucial to the effort.

"It's been an absolute privilege to be able to see a return of native species that we have never seen here before," Jathan says. "To see a bird making a nest with bison fur, something that was normal pre-European settlement, is being done again here on our farm." Jathan describes the many birds, insects and hundreds of types of prairie plants and flowers blooming on their land. These animals, he says, use the restored land as a resting point, and then use the farm stream that runs into the greenbelt as a safe passage.

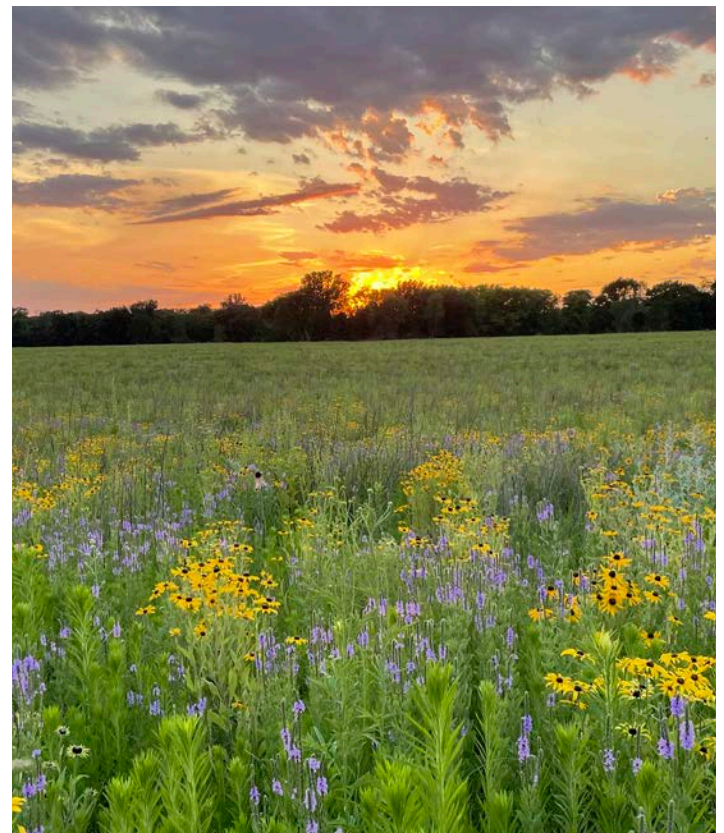
Challenges and Opportunities

Even if farmers don't have the same large-scale habitat goals as Jathan and Racheal, there are still many ways farmers can weave habitat into their own production goals. When several farmers in a local area add habitat, even smaller patches, they start to act as bigger interlinked corridors. "Even small-scale endeavors can have a significant impact on restoring biodiversity and creating areas that wildlife can feel safe in and travel through," Jathan says.

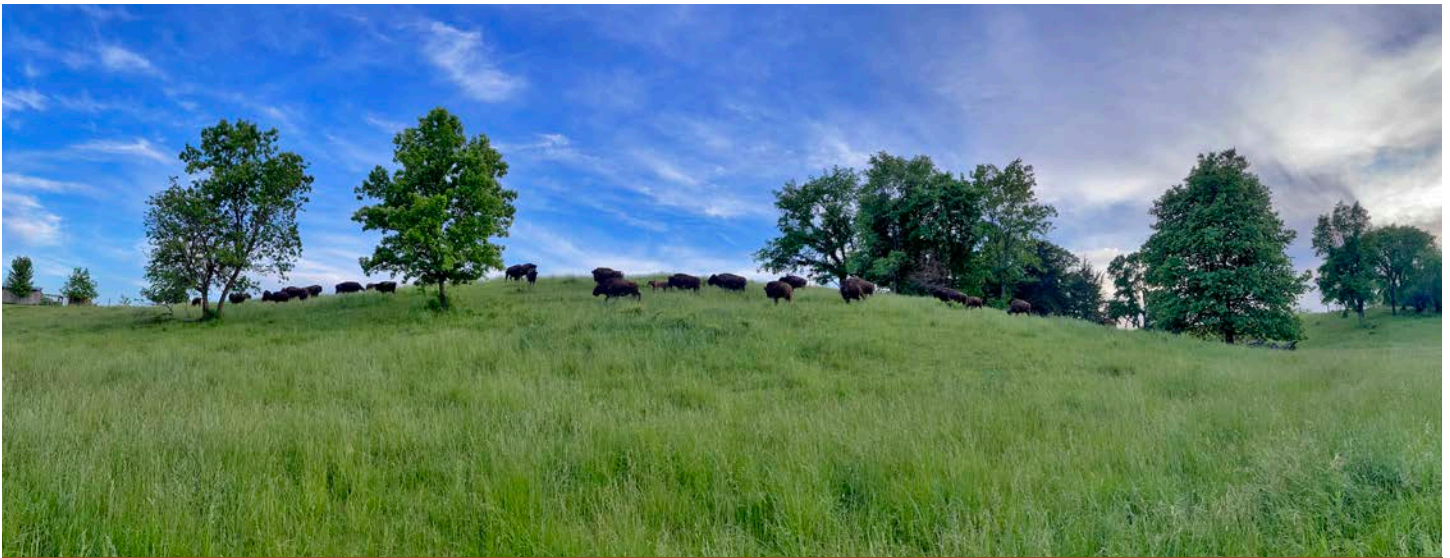
Brad Woodson, who recently served as PFI's habitat viability manager, agrees. He suggests farmers take advantage of



Jathan stands in front of his restored riparian corridor, a critical artery for wildlife. Bison graze in the background. Photo by Sara Diehn.



Prairie plants bloom on Jathan and Racheal's farm, creating a wildlife corridor that connects to habitat on nearby public land. Photo by Jathan Chicoine.



Bison roam in restored prairie on Jathan Chicoine and Racheal Ruble's farm near Story City, Iowa. Photo by Jathan Chicoine.

precision conservation, which pinpoints underperforming or marginal areas of their land that could be converted to habitat. Knowing those areas, farmers could add conservation practices like prairie strips and wetlands, which would benefit their farms while contributing to a potential wildlife corridor.

While Brad says some farmers worry about taking land from production, he notes that Iowa has a “built-in solution” for farmers who are hesitant about habitat.

“The state is full of rivers, streams and creeks. These are natural corridors that are often unsuitable for agriculture and are easiest for farmers to implement various habitat projects,” Brad says. “Taking areas out of production that border waterways and installing habitat can go a long way to creating thousands of miles of natural corridor.”

“Often these farms are also more economically viable,” he adds, “because they are improving their soil and water quality as well, which makes for healthier land. But I think the biggest plus for habitat is the aesthetic value. You can’t really put a dollar figure on it.”

A variety of federal and state programs offer incentive payments for conservation practices that can help farmers and landowners concerned about profitability. The Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, both administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, are two such programs.

Jathan and Racheal tapped into EQIP and were able to access a loan through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Service Agency. They’ve also been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and PFI on their oxbow and wetland restoration project. “We really couldn’t have gotten that start without those systems of support,” Jathan says. “Funding is

“Taking areas out of production that border waterways and installing habitat can go a long way to creating thousands of miles of natural corridor.”

- Brad Woodson

often a barrier as many small farmers work off-farm jobs to pay for the farm.”

Once farmers have added habitat, they have to manage it to help it reach its full potential, or to sustain it over time. For Jathan and Racheal, controlling invasive species in their restored prairies has been a never-ending task. Luckily, they get some help from their bison herd, which grazes some of those problem plants. They also like to rub against the invasive cedars. Over time, Jathan says this effectively girdles the cedars, lessening his maintenance load.

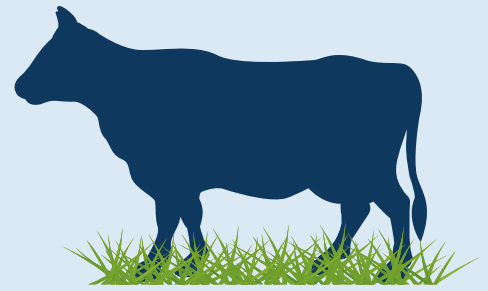
The restoration work at Native Prairie Bison has helped Jathan and his family deepen their connections to the land and the web of life intimately linked to it. But the connections also extend to the human community. They routinely host school groups and university students, who learn about Iowa’s native landscape while learning from Jathan and Racheal’s guiding philosophy of interdependence. Even the house on their farm where Jathan and his family now live flowed from their restoration work. Jathan says a neighbor who appreciated their efforts offered to sell the acreage.

“It was the focus on restoration of native ecosystems that created opportunities for us,” Jathan says. “Iowa was once the heart of the tallgrass prairie, and we want to leave our land in better condition for future generations.” ■

In Search of Flerds

Mixed-species grazing is common in nature, and used to be a more common agricultural practice. Some PFI members are adapting this practice on their farms.

By Amos Johnson



George Heller's flerd of cattle and sheep graze together near Wadena, Minnesota.

Over meals at field days, or at the annual conference the past couple of years, farmers have expressed curiosity about what goes into grazing a flerd. They'd heard about it but never tried it themselves, and they wanted to learn more from folks who have tried it.

But first, what is a flerd? This silly-sounding word is a portmanteau of “flock” and “herd” used to indicate when those two groups of livestock have been combined into one. Most often, this takes the form of a flock of sheep or herd of goats and a herd of cattle grazing and being managed together as an integrated unit. Here in the Midwest, the practice is less common than in other parts of the world – and even in the history of American agriculture. Language bears this out.

According to lexicographers at Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “a herd was any group of animals traveling or eating together, as was a flock, and this jumble continued on into the modern era.” It's also worth noting that many languages past (Egyptian, ancient Greek) and present (Finnish, Georgian, Mongolian) don't distinguish between what types of animals assemble in herds versus flocks. A group of livestock is simply a group of livestock.

This lack of distinction is a hint that the practice of grazing sheep, poultry, cattle or other animals together is more common than one might assume. Though there is vocal interest from our members to learn more about flerds, it turns out that there are far fewer people actually doing it. But two brave souls volunteered to share their experiences.

George Heller, of Wadena, Minnesota, started out grazing sheep, added cattle and never looked back. He was inspired after learning from renowned grazier Greg Judy, who operates the grass-based livestock ranch Green Pastures Farm near Rucker, Missouri. Greg has influenced many farmers and ranchers with his approach that's based on working with nature and keeping inputs to a minimum. Greg and his wife Jan have been grazing their St. Croix hair sheep together with their cattle for years.

“Cattle and sheep actually work in harmony together,” Greg says in a 2019 instructional video about mixed-species grazing on his YouTube channel (he also shared similar advice with PFI members during a short course before our 2024 Annual Conference). “They both eat different species and also act as dead-end hosts for each other's parasites. Sheep make cattle pasture better with reduced brush load.”

“The reason I'm doing any of this is because of Greg,” George says. “He's been the driving force behind this management. I just do everything as close to what he does on his farm.”



Ethan and Rebecca Book

Ethan Book, who farms outside of Knoxville, Iowa, has also been grazing a flerd as long as he's had sheep and cattle. Due to limited infrastructure, Ethan keeps animals together on a field he describes as "a sacrifice area," where the animals congregate and churn up the soil, near the house for easier care during the winter. Sharing this space together has meant the sheep and cows have bonded with one another – which has pros, such as protection from predators and more efficient use of land. But it can also create some challenges.

Mineral supplements are one challenge. Cattle mineral formulations contain levels of copper that are toxic to sheep. George has avoided this dilemma by simply not feeding minerals at all. He's looking at starting, however, and thinks that providing a free-choice, cafeteria-style system where each mineral is offered separately will let the sheep opt to simply avoid the copper. Ethan feeds either a sheep-specific mineral mix, or an all-stock mineral that's suitable for both species. During lambing season, however, he separates the flerd and gives the cattle mineral specific to them that contains copper.

Fencing can also be a challenge. Ethan and George use two- to three-strand polywire, which is plenty for cattle but not for sheep determined to get through. To avoid sheep escapes, both George and Ethan move their flerds quickly. "When I have them together, I'm moving them a little faster than I otherwise would so that the sheep respect the fence," Ethan says.

Mimicking Nature

Despite the challenges, practitioners of flerd grazing appreciate its benefits. George and Ethan both cite how grazing their cattle and sheep together results in better forage use and saves them time. "It's only one set of chores," George says. "That's the number-one reason I do this. I wouldn't have the time to farm if I had them in separate plots."

Ethan echoes this point: "It's not a big agricultural decision I'm making, so much as it's a time management situation for us."

For farmers like George, who wouldn't otherwise have the time to manage and move two separate groups of livestock, grazing cattle and sheep together makes it possible to diversify their incomes. Other flerd graziers appreciate the predator control that cattle can provide to sheep.



Central to the practice, however, is the link between mixed-species grazing and forage health. Historically, grassland ecosystems throughout the world evolved in concert with multiple megafaunal grazing species coexisting on the landscape. In North America, Indigenous Peoples used fire to manage prairies for the vast herds of bison, which grazed alongside herds of elk and antelope before moving on to the next area of fresh grazing. These alternating periods of grazing and growing are the basis of today's managed rotational grazing practice, which gives plants time to recover in between grazing sessions.

In continuously grazed pastures, however, plants don't have a chance to regrow and store surplus energy. Because livestock have a taste for fresh, new leaves, as soon as plants start regrowing, the animal returns for a tasty second bite. This stress limits the speed at which a plant can regrow, or can weaken the plant until it dies. Few species of palatable plants thrive in these conditions. Over time, low-producing, unpalatable and undesirable plants come to dominate continuously grazed pastures.

In intact grassland ecosystems, by contrast, overgrazing was rarely a problem. Animals grazed an area for preferred plants – and each species had its own particular foraging tastes. Instead of competing for food, different species complemented each other. Versions of these mixed-species migrations can be seen today on the Serengeti in Africa. Wildebeest, zebras, antelope and other grazers all move together and intermingle.

"The grazing is better. The sheep will eat stuff the cattle won't. You get a more even graze. They complement each other well."

- George Heller

For advocates of flerd grazing, re-creating this natural dynamic is a big part of the theory behind the practice. On the North American Plains, now covered in farms, the role once played by bison, elk and antelope is now filled by domesticated farm animals. Bison, like cows, prefer a mix of 80-20 grass to forbs. Elk and antelope are more like sheep and goats, preferring at least 50-50 grass to forbs, up to an 80-20 ratio.

George puts it simply: "The grazing is better. The sheep will eat stuff the cattle won't. You get a more even graze. They complement each other well." This mutualism means farmers can raise more animals on the same piece of land, which can mean more profits without growing the size of the farm.

The practical benefits of flerds are many. But for George, there are intangible pleasures as well. Watching his flerd peacefully graze together, he tries to describe the visceral joy he feels. "Standing there watching them, hearing them rip up grass while they eat," he says. "Listening to all the wildlife, the birds flying around, the insects. Just standing out there, in the quiet – being." ■

Beyond **‘Random Acts of Oats’**

A growing group of Minnesota farmers is banding together to prove the viability of raising a third crop in rotation at scale

By Lydia English

When Kevin Connelly decided to plant 20 acres of oats in the spring of 2020, it was the first time the crop had been raised on the Byron, Minnesota, dairy farm in two decades. His father, now retired from farming, was not pleased when he caught wind of this plan. Kevin recounts how his dad told him, “You can’t grow oats. Where are you going to sell them?”

Undeterred, Kevin forged ahead. “People see oats as old-school,” he explains. “They think they can’t make any money on it.”

Down the road a few miles, Martin Larsen was also seeding his very first oat crop that year. He and Kevin were both passionate about water quality and curious about stacking another practice on their farm in addition to cover crops and no-till. Corn and soybeans prices in 2020 continued to trend on the low end, so the idea of raising a crop with few input requirements – and therefore lower up-front costs – appealed to them. “Oats spread my workload and my marketing risk,” Martin says. “They lowered the amount of money I needed to spend on other crops.”

Kevin, Martin and neighbor Tom Pyffereon, who all subsequently became PFI members, collectively seeded a couple hundred acres of oats that spring – unaware they were starting a bigger movement for the region.



Martin Larsen’s oat field near Byron, Minnesota.

“I think the fact that there’s a core group of us farmers that have raised oats successfully gives others confidence to try out it too.” - Paul Kylo

An Oat Collective Emerges

The following spring, Martin’s neighbor, Paul Kylo, decided to plant oats too. “I liked the idea of oats in my rotation, especially because I could grow clover,” says Paul, a PFI member who also farms in Byron. “You don’t need to convince a dairy farmer of the value of corn following a legume in rotation.” His initial experience was a bit rocky, but also informative. “My first year growing oats I had a very good crop. The second year I did the exact same thing and it was a disaster,” Paul says. “This was good from a learning perspective about what not to do.”

The four Byron-area farmers grew oats and gained experience for a couple of years. Then, in 2022, a few factors converged that made other farmers take notice. A consumer-packaged goods company interested in sourcing from the region approached Martin with an attractive oat bid: \$7.30 per bushel. This was higher than any competing offers and quickly caught farmers’ attention. The company, which asked not to be named because of the sensitivity surrounding financial investments it’s made in various pilot testing programs, also purchased a Grain Cleaning Solutions cleaner for area farmers to use on their oats post-harvest.

Since test weight, the heft of the grain, is make-or-break for the marketability of oats destined for the food-grade sector, the grain cleaner allowed farmers to separate their high-quality, heavy grain, from anything light or unmarketable. “The cleaner took stress off farmers,” says Martin, who houses and operates the cleaner on his farm. “They were more comfortable growing oats since they had that ‘insurance program’ for their test weight.” The competitive grain price, coupled with the assurance the crop could be marketed due to the grain cleaner, attracted another 10 local farmers. Collectively, they raised over 1,000 acres of oats that year.

Unfortunately, private investment in the region was short-lived. In 2023, the lucrative market opportunity fizzled, threatening to cut off any budding interest in raising oats. However, as oat prices went back down, a local cost-share opportunity emerged to make up the difference. Olmsted County Soil and Water Conservation District, where Martin also works as a soil conservation technician, launched a program aimed at lowering nitrates in their groundwater, which is the drinking water source for the area.

The new program reimbursed farmers \$100 per acre to put in clover after oats. While the oats themselves wouldn’t sell at a high price, the impressive cost-share payment, coupled with high nitrogen prices that year, meant oats and clover continued to pique the interest of a growing number of local producers.

The group, Byron Area Farmers, snowballed.

(Continued on page 16 →)



Martin Larsen with a field of oats ready to be harvested.



*An emerging crop of oats receives fertilizer in early spring.
Photo by Martin Larsen.*



Top row: Members of Byron Area Farmers gather in the field to discuss oat production and marketing (photo by Martin Larsen).

Middle row (left to right): Kevin Connelly (left) and Paul Kylo (right); Martin's dog Annie bounds through an oat field (photo by Martin Larsen); a handful of oat groats.

Bottom row (left to right): Martin Larsen during an interview for PFI's "Practical Cover Cropper" video series; Martin and his son, Rudy, with a new piece of farm equipment (photo by Martin Larsen).

“This [group] is what I wanted, but I never knew it would come together as successfully as it has.” - Martin Larsen

Collective Support

Seeing the challenges individual farmers faced marketing oats, Martin decided that the rapidly growing group of farmers should pool their bushels and collectively market their grain, which theoretically could give them better bargaining power. By the summer of 2023, Byron Area Farmers, now comprising 35 farms, had raised 350,000 bushels of oats to sell. But marketing a crop with few buyers still proved challenging at the group level.

“[In 2023] all our oats got marketed right at harvest, which created a lot of stress for me beforehand,” says Martin, who

took on all the marketing himself. Despite the stress, he’s adamant the group will continue to stick together going forward. He anticipates they’ll collectively market nearly 600,000 bushels in 2024, enough to fill up 400 semi-loads.

To ensure the farmers are marketing a high-quality, consistent product, anyone who joins Byron Area Farmers must follow the same agronomic guidance. That means agreeing to use recommended seeding rates, varieties, crop inputs and harvest settings. Standardizing management practices ensures farmers are growing a reliable product that won’t be rejected due to a small amount of contamination. The guidelines also help new oat growers get started by providing a playbook of best practices. “I think the fact that there’s a core group of us farmers that have raised oats successfully gives others confidence to try out it too,” Paul says.

Martin intentionally brings the group together a few times a year to share information, prepare for the upcoming season and discuss challenges. With solid agronomy and a community of practice, their oats have performed well. In 2023, the group averaged a yield of 105 bushels per acre, which is over 20 bushels per acre higher than the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2023 average for Olmsted County. “We had to treat these oats like a cash crop,” Kevin says. “Once we started doing that, the results were clear.”

For Martin, building a local community of farmers growing oats and pooling their resources is a way to bring back access to markets that have disappeared from the region. “We need to stop producing ‘random acts of oats,’” he says. “Companies need to see we can reliably raise their product.”

But the infrastructure needed to develop new supply chains is costly and the convenience of using existing market channels keeps the system entrenched. Companies remain slow to commit to sourcing from the region, despite growing farmer interest in raising oats, and despite plans already in the works for a farmer-owned grain mill to be built in Minnesota in the coming years. “We have a story to tell,” Paul says. “Everyone wants a story but they [companies that buy oats] are all a little hesitant to pay.”

This isn’t stopping the Minnesota farmers’ resolve. Despite the perpetual challenges of keeping oats competitive in a corn-soybean environment and slow buy-in from companies, the group’s leaders – Martin, Kevin, Paul and Tom – are steadfastly committed to (and pleasantly surprised at) what they’ve built.

“This [group] is what I wanted, but I never knew it would come together as successfully as it has,” Martin says. “We are going to keep growing and not stop anytime soon. We are stubbornly invested in this work.” ■

Learn More

Scan the QR code below or visit our YouTube channel (bit.ly/raisingoats) to watch this video about the “Economics of Raising Oats” with Martin Larsen.



In this video, filmed in 2022, Martin discusses what it costs to raise oats, and potential revenue, for farmers to compare with raising corn. He describes how including oats in the rotation changes the overall profitability of his rotation, including reduced applied nitrogen in the corn year and increased yield in corn and soybean years. Martin also explains how rural economies are impacted by farmers staying profitable with extended rotations.

2024 FIELD DAY Season

Visiting farms to see what farmers do and how they do it is one of the best ways to learn about farming. PFI field days give our farmer-hosts a platform to share what works for them - and what isn't working. These events also give attendees the chance to look, listen and learn from other farmers while broadening their peer networks. In sharing their knowledge and hospitality, field day hosts create space for the curiosity and connections that foster learning and build resilient farms and communities.





Opposite page: From amongst the brassicas at Mustard Seed Community Farm, Alice McGary shares her passions for community, food, curiosity and justice. (June 30, Ames, IA) **(1)** One of Michael and Courtney Gutschenritter's laying hens joins field day attendees to learn about building a multispecies grazing system. (July 16, Oconomowoc, WI) **(2)** Rob Stout chats with a field day attendee during the event he and his wife, Jean Stout, hosted on their 120-acre farm. The field day highlighted their cover crop practices and on-farm research trials. (June 19, Washington, IA) **(3)** Three generations of Wilsons helped make Torray and Erin's dairy grazing and compost extract field day a success. (June 7, Paullina, IA)





1

- (1) Andrea Hazzard discusses her grain milling operations with a group of field day attendees before showing them where she mills her small grains into flour products. (July 19, Pecatonica, IL) (2) Rose Farm interns and staff listen as Karri Rose (far right) shares how she and her husband Patrick Rose (center) shaped the farm's ethos, ecosystem and customer experiences. (June 23, Norwalk, IA) (3) Jenny Horner points out pasture plants that the goats she raises with Emilio Moreno like to munch on at their farm. (May 25, Red Oak, IA)
- (4) The hogs at the VanDerPol field day were just as interested in their visitors as we were about them. These deep-bedded pigs are just about ready for market. (July 23, Kerkhoven, MN) (5) Harley Hett shares his wisdom about growing wheat as his farm partner, Doug Adams, looks on. Doug has been gradually farming more of Harley's acres over time as Harley transitions to retirement. (June 26, Humboldt, IA)
- (6) Kittleson Brothers partner Adam Koch (at right with the mic) answers questions about the onion harvester used for their 35 acres of onions in north-central Iowa. (July 10, Fertile, IA)
- (7) Hosts Chris and Shannon Gaesser welcomed guests to their farm to see triticale in the field, learn about their many research trials and hear about the whiskey made at Revelton Distillery with their rye. (July 10, Corning, IA) (8) The soil in prepped fields at T.D. and Sarah Holub's field day is a natural draw for budding young soil scientists, who playfully explore soil texture and quality. (June 30, Coggon, IA) (9) Field day attendees hear from host J.D. Hollingsworth about his first time crimping a rye cover crop. (June 17, Packwood, IA) (10) A break in the pouring rain gives way for Kevin Wagner to show field day attendees an oat field with red clover underseeding. (June 28, Cuba City, WI)

2









6

(1) Kim Andersen shares a grateful squeeze with husband Steve Andersen following a hot and sweaty field day at Blueberry Bottom Farm, during which she showcased eight varieties of organic blueberries grown on 5 acres and 2 acres of organic day-neutral strawberries grown in high tunnels. (July 11, Brighton, IA) (2) T.D. Holub, of Garden Oasis Farm drives the tractor during his hands-on field day to give DaQuan Campbell (left) and Jamie Madison (right) a chance to try out his water wheel planter. (June 30, Coggon, IA) (3) Heidi Eger (left) and Cindy Wolf (center) watch with rapt attention as Cecka Parks, of the Minneapolis Meat Collective, divides up a lamb during a workshop focused on understanding meat cuts and how to cook, photograph and market them. (July 13, Spring Grove, MN)

(4) Edmund Ruff (left) identifies cover crop species in educational plots he planted on a rodeo arena at the local fairgrounds last fall. (June 20, Garnavillo, IA) (5) A field day attendee pulls up a sunn hemp seedling from a field recently planted with an 18-way cover crop mix on Scott and Catherine Wedemeier's farm in northeast Iowa. (July 2, Maynard, IA) (6) Attendees listen as Ethan Book explains how he's using cover crops to transition row crop ground to permanent pasture. (June 14, Knoxville, IA) (7) A group of students in Iowa State University's Science Bound program, which engages youth starting in middle school and guides them through college graduation, attend Adam Ledvina's field day on goat health and management. (July 11, Chelsea, IA)



7



1

(1) Alec Amundson speaks with field day attendees about his rye and soybean rotations and the never-ending battle to control weeds. (July 24, Osage, IA) (2) Kurtis Kadolph hauls field day attendees through a habitat planting on the way back from the first part of a farm tour that included seeing in-field and remote sensing technology, cover crops, edge-of-field conservation practices and more. (June 22, Hubbard IA) (3) Adam Ledvina enjoys his second round of authentic street tacos after hosting his first event in the “Year in the Life” series, held in Spanish, exploring different aspects of goat production. (May 21, Chelsea, IA) (4) Steve Robisky leads a prairie walk showcasing his restored prairie, lending expert advice on how conservation and economics can work together. (June 12, Cedar Falls, IA) (5) Junior and Katelyn Pfanstiel (left) and Gene and Julie Pfanstiel (right) smile after a successful field day that narrowly missed some heavy rain. (June 27, McLean NE) (6) Stacy Dresow introduces her Cormo and Finn sheep to a damp but dedicated group at the field day on the basics of raising sheep for wool. (June 20, Lonsdale, MN) (7) Auggie the goat greets the PFI staff at Jenny Horner and Emillio Moreno’s field day on a chilly March morning. (March 29, Red Oak, IA) (8) Courtney Myers, district conservationist with the Grundy County Soil and Water Conservation District, does a soil runoff demonstration during a workshop at the Grundy County Fair. (July 18, Grundy Center, IA) (9) Kamyar Enshayan, University of Northern Iowa professor and garden director for the nonprofit Peoples Health Clinic, and Sarah Nizzie of the Xerces Society share how urban gardens can feed the local community and serve as food sources for pollinators. (July 20, Waterloo, IA) (10) At Rose Farm, PFI staffer Grace Yi meets with Sissy the farm cat, ambassador of hospitality and scratches. (June 23, Norwalk, IA)



2





ROOTED

in Collaboration

By organizing a cooperative, three flower farmers in the Decorah area are blooming together.

By Jacqueline Venner Senske

Taking Root

In the summer of 2022, the number of flower farmers in Decorah, Iowa, was on the rise. Clara Muggli-Toyloy of Oak & Olive Flowers, Katie Prochaska of River Root Farm and Barb Kraus of Canoe Creek Produce were among the growing number of Decorah flower growers.

Clara, Katie and Barb all knew one another through the local network of farmers in their area, and they had already collaborated a bit by buying flowers from each other to supplement their own crops. That fall, they met up to talk about flowers. But unbeknownst to any of them, Katie and Clara both came to the gathering with the same idea in mind: working together more purposefully. “We were already thinking along similar lines,” Clara says.

Rather than compete for the same limited pool of customers, the three women discussed working together for mutual benefit. Growing competition in the area was one reason. But they also felt cooperation would help them address the barriers to finding and serving new markets and the challenges of growing a farm business while juggling the production aspects of raising their flower crops. Beyond these needs, the three all shared a desire for greater collaboration and less business rivalry.

“For me, the addition of a bunch of new flower farmers felt a little bit stressful. But the three of us had built some trust over time by purchasing flowers from one another,” Clara says.

Having discovered they were on the same page about collaborating more formally, the three women jumped in. They aligned around their needs and goals and agreed to create a collaborative plan over the fall and winter. At the start of 2023, they planned to launch the new collective business.

Leafing Out

The three farmers wanted their partnership to start small and be built on trust, so they invested the time at the start. As they worked out their plan, Clara, Katie and Barb made space for long discussions over lunch and chats over coffee to discuss business philosophies, goals and intentions and to ensure alignment about direction, roles and responsibilities.

One of the biggest decisions they needed to make was the business model. Through free coaching from the U.S. Small Business Administration in Winneshiek County, the women explored business structure options. One option was a sole proprietorship through one of their existing farms, which required no articles of incorporation – a setup they ended up veering away from as they wanted to be equally invested. “It felt so important at the time for it to be a collaboration with the three of us,” Clara says.



Photo courtesy of Clara Muggli-Toyloy

A second option was to incorporate as a multimember LLC, which would pass profit and loss through to each individual farmer. The tax implications of this model proved more complex, and it ultimately felt less flexible. Third, they could form a cooperative, a business structure owned and democratically controlled by members who provide the equity investment. The trio decided this option was the best fit.

Next, they had to decide on marketing. They chose to focus on a wholesale market stream, with florists as their main customers, and selected a simple and recognizable name: Decorah Flower Hub. The online marketplace Rooted Farmers was chosen as a second stream due to its easy sales interface, ability for multiple farmers to add products according to availability, farmer-level payout and accounting features.

Clara credits the Decorah area and its unique context with inspiring their actions. They'd looked to other models of flower farmer collectives in the Midwest, but didn't feel those were transferrable to rural northeastern Iowa. The Michigan Flower Growers' Collective, for instance, offers an aggregated marketplace and delivery service in Ann Arbor. In Minnesota, the Twin Cities Flower Exchange is a physical wholesale market with 100% locally sourced, chemical-free flowers that serves area flower businesses.

"Being in a community like Decorah set the stage for us to think collaboratively rather than competitively," Clara says, referencing Oneota Food Co-op, the city's 50-year-old cooperative grocery store. "Groups like PFI help to foster that collaboration as well."

Buds and Thorns

The journey hasn't been without its share of bumps, however. 2024 marks year two of the Decorah Flower Hub, and Clara



Photo courtesy of Clara Muggli-Toyloy

Clara Muggli-Toyloy and her daughter

says that by June, the reality – and the struggle – of starting a new venture had set in.

"This year feels harder because we're at the sales and marketing phase," she says. Katie explains that this season, Decorah Flower Hub has the same number of wholesale customers as 2023 – "which is like two people," she says. "2023 was a pilot year. We are finding that growth takes time. And we are also learning to function as partners in this venture."

One challenge has been growing their customer base. Orders from florists, their main sales focus, have fallen short of their revenue goal. "We did networking lunches with florists in the spring. It was lovely, and they all said positive things," Clara says. "But now, they just aren't ordering." Achieving their goals, the women are learning, may mean doing more than just sending out an availability list.

(Continued on page 28 →)



Clara Muggli-Toyloy, Katie Prochaska and Barb Kraus at the 2024 PFI annual conference.

For instance, Katie says not all florists want to order on a website every week; some prefer a phone call. While florists have praised the quality of their flowers, Clara says the onus is on the farmers to be more proactive. “It’s going to be a process of increased community education, persistence and lots of follow-up with customers,” she says. Katie agrees. “We need to elevate the ‘why’ of our crops in terms of labor impacts, pollution and more. It’s equally as important as the ‘why’ of local food.”

Taking a broader view, Clara reflects on what others thinking of a collaborative farm model should know. “If I could offer advice, it would be to figure out how to fund someone to keep hours going toward marketing. Since we’re all doing the growing as well as the marketing, we are all just really stretched.”

Clara emphasizes that the collaboration has been worth it. “The cooperative model is flexible, and we could shift tactics going forward. The Decorah Flower Hub can adapt to suit its members.” The women are also able to learn from and support one another, whether sharing growing techniques,

“The cooperative model is flexible, and we could shift tactics going forward. The Decorah Flower Hub can adapt to suit its members.”

-Clara Muggli-Toyloy

supplementing each other’s harvests and connecting through social get-togethers.

The farmers are also quick to point out how the collaboration has opened new opportunities. “Now, I know I can say yes to weddings because I can supplement from what Barb and Katie have available,” Clara says. “Working together feels better. We feel like we’re in it together.”

Ready to Bloom

As they approach the end of their second season, the winds might be shifting. Word about the Decorah Flower Hub is spreading. Phelps Farm near Guttenberg, Iowa, not far from Decorah, signed on to the cooperative for the

2024 season to test it out. And growers elsewhere in the state have reached out to learn more.

Central Iowa farmers Catherine Schut of Hive & Petal Bees & Blooms in Prairie City, and Tara Bird of Wild Bird Farm at Madrid, along with PFI’s business viability manager, Savanah Laur, met with Clara and Katie to learn about their process and ask questions. After talking through the ins and outs of starting a regional, cooperative flower hub in Iowa, the farmers eschewed the idea – at least for now.

But the appeal of collaboration is strong: Catherine and Tara plan to team up to fill large orders, thus expanding their market options. They also agreed to align their crop planning for the coming season. Clearly, more lies ahead for groups of flower farmers all around Iowa. And while collaboration may not provide quick fixes to all the problems, like market security, it does offer significant benefits.

“Farming can be really lonely,” Clara says. “It’s great to find a community of people who make me feel supported and held moving forward with my business. I’m grateful for that.” ■

Learn More

Katie, Clara and Barb presented about their collaboration at the 2024 PFI Annual Conference.

View their presentation, “Piloting the Decorah Flower Hub,” at practicalfarmers.org/2024-conference-materials.



Photo courtesy of Clara Muggli-Toyloy

Review of Paul Fehribach's "Midwestern Food" Cookbook

By Kjersten Oudman

As a vegetable farmer, I'm always looking for recipes to encourage people to eat more vegetables. I was hopeful that Paul Fehribach's cookbook, "Midwestern Food: A Chef's Guide to the Surprising History of a Great American Cuisine," would offer some new ideas on this front. As a born-and-raised Midwesterner, though, I was not shocked that even through the eyes of a renowned chef, Midwestern food is still all about meat and potatoes.

Paul, an Indiana native who owns and operates the restaurant Big Jones in Chicago, wrote this book as a love letter to the cuisine of the Midwest. His goal is not to try to convince us that Midwestern food is different than what we assume. Rather, his aim is to celebrate burgers, sandwiches and even green bean casseroles for what they are.

"Midwestern Food" is more than just a collection of recipes, however. Interspersed throughout the cookbook are highlights of local farmers, chefs or folks involved with local food throughout the region. And each recipe is accompanied by a history or commentary that was enjoyable to read on its own. Recipes included in the book fall under categories such as: "Of State Fairs, Tailgates and Main Street Cafes: Sandwiches and Handheld food," "Please Pass the Corn: Vegetables and Sides" or "Pull Up a Chair: Meat and Potatoes."

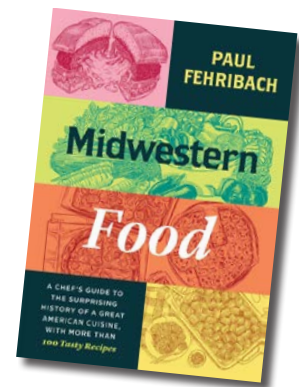
There weren't any pictures to accompany the recipes, which I found wanting. The recipes are all stripped down and require the user to have some confidence in the kitchen. But the recipes Paul chose to include were fascinating. This is not a cookbook that will offer readers tips to Midwestern cuisine with a twist of something new. All recipes Paul included in the book had to be archetypal of Midwestern communities, and which have remained intact for at least three generations.

Requiring recipes to be unchanged for three generations meant most felt lackluster. Few recipes I tried stood out in meaningful ways. Recipes for family classics such as breaded pork tenderloin, Italian beef or "Jucy Lucy" didn't offer anything better than our own family recipes, and seemed to leave out any seasonings that could have enhanced the food. The lone standout recipe for my family was the "Bierocks a.k.a Runza" recipe (see photo below), though I think additional spices would have elevated the meat and cabbage mixture. But perhaps part of the intrigue of this cookbook is the feeling that family recipes, however familiar, are special enough to highlight.

Capturing the spirit of the Midwest also led Paul to include some truly unfamiliar recipes, such as the "Cannibal/Wildcat" – a sandwich made entirely from raw ground beef. This was unknown to me and did not sound appetizing. However, Paul's persuasive writing changed my thoughts from, "I would never put this in my mouth," to "maybe I'd try this in the right circumstances."

"Midwestern Food" honors the tried-and-true food that gathers Midwestern families around the dinner table. Though more history or anthology than cookbook at times, it is entertaining and a source of new information. It may not be a book that I'll frequently pull out before weeknight dinner. But it was nice to have familiar recipes celebrated, even if they are mostly meat and potatoes.

Kjersten Oudman farms with her husband, Dirk, and children, at Blue Sky Vegetable Co. near Worthing, South Dakota. Together, they raise more than 30 varieties of vegetables, which they market directly through custom-choice farm shares to customers in Sioux Falls and surrounding communities.



Pork Tenderloin



Kjersten Oudman



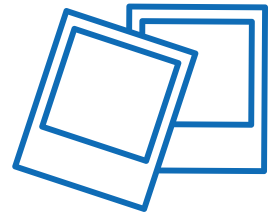
Runza

Photos courtesy of Kjersten Oudman.

PFI MEMBER

Photo Album

This section features photos taken by PFI members. Whether you're a farmer, landowner or a non-farmer, we invite you to share your images of the everyday, the awe-inspiring or the curiously beautiful from your farm or community; we'll work to curate them into the album.



A soybean field gets redecorated with the remnants of a building torn apart by a tornado. (Jacob Bolson, Beaver Creek Food & Fibre, Hubbard, IA)



Kiwiberries ripen on the vine. (Jeff Sindelar, Deb's Berry Farm, Newhall, IA)



Whoops! Work gets derailed by a surprise side seep on a new farm. (Josh Nelson, Cardinal Creek Farm, Belmond, IA)



Asa and his dad inspect a volunteer cereal rye field before it gets chopped for feed. (Keith Olson, Circle K Ranch, Canby, MN)



The hay baling crew takes a break with the fruits (er bales) of their labor. (Wendy Johnson, Jóia Food Farm, Charles City, IA)



Burlap bags provide good weed control – and a comfy resting spot! (Stephanie Finklea, Black Chick Farm and Omaha Sunflower Cooperative, Omaha, NE)



Engaging in a tried-and-tested character-building task, a youthful crew takes to the field and walks beans. (MaryAnn Mathis, Elkhart, IA)



Radishes that have been cleaned and prepped are ready for distribution. (Shad Swanson, Garden of Paradise, Essex, IA)



A pile of mini sweet peppers is ready for snacking. (Steve Strasheim, Twisted River Farm, Mitchell, IA)



Have a photo you'd like featured in the magazine?
Email it to liz.kolbe@practicalfarmers.org or tag PFI on social media and let us know!

Meet the Newest Members of PFI's Team

Kelsie Eckhart | Human Resources Coordinator



Kelsie Eckhart joined the Practical Farmers of Iowa staff in June 2024 as the human resources coordinator. In this role, she helps PFI attract qualified applicants, supports new staff members and fosters a culture of care for employees.

Kelsie graduated from Oklahoma State University in 2014 with a Bachelor of Science in business management and a minor in marketing and is currently studying to obtain her Professional in Human Resources certification. Prior to working at Practical Farmers of Iowa, Kelsie worked in various human resources and administrative roles in government, retail and sporting industries (go Chiefs!). Her passion for making things better than she found them and having a people-first attitude drove her to join the PFI team.

Kelsie grew up in Oklahoma City where she met her husband, Branten, who is currently in the Navy and is from State Center, Iowa. After living in Florida, Hawaii and Maryland, they are happy to be near family again permanently and now reside in Ankeny, Iowa, with their two golden retrievers, Kaia and Quinn. In her free time, you may find Kelsie exploring a new national park, walking her golden girls, reading or working on obtaining some cooking skills. ■

Austin Geist | Senior Data System Coordinator



Austin Geist joined the Practical Farmers of Iowa staff in July 2024 as the senior data systems coordinator. In this role, Austin oversees the design and implementation of data management tools for the farm viability department, and

designs the processes required to ensure consistency and efficiency.

Austin is an Arizonan native who has been deeply immersed in agriculture since he and his family moved to central Iowa in 2010. After earning his bachelor's degree in agricultural studies from Iowa State University, Austin and his wife settled in Marshalltown, Iowa. He is excited to use his prior knowledge and experience to help overcome challenges currently faced

within the farm viability departments' data management structure at PFI.

In his spare time, Austin volunteers with the Animal Rescue League of Marshalltown alongside his wife. They assist with anything from fostering and rehabilitating troubled animals to helping with back-end support of event planning and fundraising. Austin is also a passionate "DIYer" who enjoys tackling as many projects as time allows around his home, and for his family. ■

Graham Giesting | Senior Research Coordinator



Graham Giesting joined Practical Farmers of Iowa as senior research coordinator for the Cooperators' Program in June 2024. In this role, Graham works with

farmers to co-design on-farm research trials, and to analyze and interpret trial results.

Graham studied biology at St. Olaf College. After graduating, he worked as a chef. This experience brought home the importance of the food network, as well as revealing some of its distortions. Graham went back to school for a master's degree in crop science from the University of Hohenheim in Germany, where

he lived for three years. He misses two things most about Germany: the "wanderwege" hiking trails and German bread.

Graham grew up in Minnesota. He loves the forests, lakes, prairies and rivers of the Upper Midwest and likes to spend as much time as he can outdoors. He is often listening to an audiobook on a walk. He also enjoys cooking, and is trying to develop his garden. ■

Rick Hartmann | Field Crops Viability Coordinator



Rick Hartmann joined the Practical Farmers staff as a field crops viability coordinator in the summer of 2024, after several years assisting PFI as a contract employee.

Currently, he helps farmers involved in PFI's cost-share programs and collects data from those programs for their evaluation.

Rick grew up on a small farm in eastern Iowa, just above the Wapsipinicon River floodplain,

raising hogs farrow-to-finish as his own on-farm enterprise. Much of his free time was spent tramping through the timbers and river bottoms on and around the farm.

After leaving the farm, Rick received a bachelor's degree in agronomy and a master's degree in plant breeding at Iowa State University. After some years working and travelling, some law school and education training, Rick returned to Ames and worked both at Iowa State's Plant Pathology Department and Practical Farmers of Iowa helping develop local systems.

Between Rick's first job at PFI (nearly 25 years ago) and his current work, he and his wife Stacy ran a small direct-market, certified organic vegetable farm in Dallas County for over 15 years. For several years, he also inspected other certified organic operations for different certifying agencies.

Outside of work, Rick enjoys repairing and restoring wood sash windows, preparing and using traditional non-hydraulic lime mortar and plaster, gardening, pie baking, reading (particularly short-story fiction), volunteer work and cinema. ■

Anna Pesek | Digital Content Coordinator



Anna Pesek (Hankins) joined the PFI staff as the digital content coordinator in June 2024. In this role, she handles social media and email newsletter content for the organization. Previously, Anna served PFI as a farmer-at-large representative on the board of directors, and as a member of PFI's Livestock Education Committee.

Anna Pesek and her wife, Shae, raise seasonal cut flowers, chickens, ducks, turkeys and farrow-to-finish Berkshire pigs at Over the

Moon Farm, located in Delaware County, Iowa. They have been farming since 2019, marketing through a CSA and their online farm store, as well as developing wholesale clients for their products.

Anna has a background in sustainable agriculture, earning her bachelor's degree from the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2016. For the last decade, Anna has been involved in communications and community organizing work through the Student/Farmers Coalition via the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the National Family Farm Coalition and local food procurement work in various institutions.

Currently, Anna is pursuing her Master of Business Administration with a focus on entrepreneurship and marketing at the University of Northern Iowa.

Outside of her role with PFI, Anna is passionate about connecting with other young and beginning farmers through her involvement with the Eastern Iowa Young Farmers Coalition and as a humane farming Mentor through Food Animal Concerns Trust. Her passions include raising pastured turkeys, brainstorming ways to see more livestock on the land, storytelling via social media and indulging in a good haul from the local library. Anna's most important title is Mom to her sweet son Callum. ■

On-Farm Research Corner

Do Soil Health Practices Let You Lower Nitrogen Rates?

Soil health practices like diversified rotations, cover crops and incorporating grazing livestock are known to improve soil health and nutrient cycling. But can long-term investments by farmers in these practices translate to better yields, lower fertilizer costs or both? To find out, 19 corn farmers put this concept to the test in 2023 as part of a multiyear PFI project. The farmers collectively performed 22 replicated strip trials testing their typical nitrogen rate against that rate reduced by 12%-50%.

Using an average fertilizer cost of 86 cents per pound of nitrogen, and an average corn price of \$5.02 per bushel, 16 of the 22 fields farms saved money using the reduced nitrogen rate. Sean Dengler, who farms near Traer in Tama County, Iowa, was one of those who saw no change in corn yield and better financial returns from using the reduced rate. "I thought my nitrogen rates were high to start off," Sean said when reflecting on his results. "This trial gives me confidence in reducing them across the board."

Join the research

Wondering if your nitrogen rates are right for you? We're looking for corn farmers in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin to join this ongoing project for 2025. Eligible fields will have at least a five-year history of soil health practices (cover crops, diverse rotation, integrated grazing, reduced tillage, etc.). The trial involves eight treatment strips. Four strips will receive your typical fertilizer rate, and four strips will receive a reduced rate of your choosing.

Joining PFI's on-farm trial is a low-risk way to see if you can maintain corn yields, save money – or both – when reducing applied nitrogen fertilizer. **To sign up or learn more, go to practicalfarmers.org/open-calls-for-on-farm-research-cooperators.**



Kevin Veenstra's trial field on June 19, 2023. He saw no difference in corn yield and reaped financial savings by reducing his nitrogen rate by 20 pounds of nitrogen per acre. Kevin has been using cover crops and no-till on his farm near Grinnell, Iowa, for over seven years.



Want to dig deeper?

To learn even more about this project, its previous iteration in 2022 and other projects, we encourage you to explore the research reports on our website at practicalfarmers.org/research.

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number NR216114XXXXG003, and by the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or FFAR. In addition, any reference to specific brands or types of products or services does not constitute or imply an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture or FFAR for those products or services.



PFI Field Days

Find out more at practicalfarmers.org/field-days.



OCTOBER

OCT. 1 | CHELSEA, IA

Year in the Life With Adam: Equipment Overview
Hosted by Adam Ledvina

OCT. 2 | LUZERNE, IA

Starting Out and Building Up With Pigs, Poultry and Small Grains
Hosted by Ryan & Ashley Wallace | Raw Farms

OCT. 12 | RED OAK, IA

Year in the Life With Jenny & Emilio: Goat Health Basics
Hosted by Jenny Horner & Emilio Moreno

OCT 26 | MONDAMIN, IA

Establishing Prairie: Selecting Seeds to Restore and Optimize Native Habitat
Hosted by Cait Caughey

NOVEMBER

NOV. 5 | CHELSEA, IA

Year in the Life With Adam: Fall Grazing & Pasture Management
Hosted by Adam Ledvina

NOV. 9 | MOUNT AYR, IA

Balancing Your Farm Dream With Your Family's Needs
Hosted by Kendra & Kevin Martin | Holdfast Farmstead



Other PFI Events

Registration information for all PFI events can be found at practicalfarmers.org/events, or by calling the PFI office at (515) 232-5661.

OCTOBER

OCT. 20 • Fall Flower Farmer Meet-Up

Waverly, IA | Free | Pre-registration required; Limited to 35 people | practicalfarmers.org/fall-flower-farmer-meet-up

OCT. 22 • Spanish Social at House of Compassion

211 W Church St., Marshalltown, IA | Free | practicalfarmers.org/creando-comunidad-de-granjeros-latinos

EVENTS IN SPANISH

Stay tuned to our e-news and website for information about the ongoing “Year in the Life” series on meat goat production and local Spanish socials. These online and in-person events are intended for our Spanish-speaking audience. To keep up with the latest on PFI’s Latino program, subscribe to Sembrando Resiliencia at practicalfarmers.org/email-newsletter-subscribe.



Find PFI At

OCTOBER

OCT. 8 • Iowa State University Ag & Life Sciences Career Fair
Ames, IA | [Learn more at career.cals.iastate.edu/cals-career-day](https://career.cals.iastate.edu/cals-career-day)

OCT. 9-10 • Iowa Nature Summit 2024
Des Moines, IA | [Learn more at iowanature.org](https://iowanature.org)

OCT. 21 • 2024 American Dairy Goat Association Annual Convention
Lake Geneva, WI | [Learn more at convention.adga.org](https://convention.adga.org)

NOVEMBER

NOV. 1-2 • 19th Annual Emerging Farmers Conference
Minneapolis, MN | [Learn more at emergingfarmers.org](https://emergingfarmers.org)

NOV. 16 • Iowa Farmers of Color Conference
Urbandale, IA | [Learn more at practicalfarmers.org/iowa-farmers-of-color-conference](https://practicalfarmers.org/iowa-farmers-of-color-conference)

DECEMBER

DEC. 4-6 • National Grazing Lands Conference: Expanding Grazing Horizons
Tucson, AZ | [Learn more at grazinglands.org/grazing-conference](https://grazinglands.org/grazing-conference)

PFI Current Enrollments

From October - December 2024

Cover Crop Business Accelerator

ROLLING APPLICATION

practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-business-accelerator-program

Research Trials

ROLLING APPLICATION

practicalfarmers.org/open-calls-for-on-farm-research-cooperators

Habitat Incentives Program

ROLLING APPLICATION

practicalfarmers.org/habitat-incentives-program

Savings Incentives Program

APPLICATION CLOSES NOV. 4, 2024

practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program

Sustainable Agriculture Business Incubator Program

APPLICATION CLOSES NOV. 4, 2024

practicalfarmers.org/sustainable-agriculture-business-incubator

Produce Safety Cost-Share

APPLICATION OPENS NOV. 15, 2024

practicalfarmers.org/produce-safety-cost-share

Cover Crop Cost-Share

SIGN UP DEADLINE: DEC. 2, 2024

practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-cost-share

N Rate Risk Protection Program

APPLICATION CLOSES APRIL 30, 2025

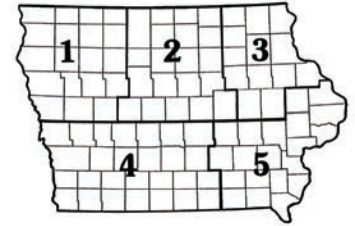
practicalfarmers.org/n-rate-risk-protection-program



The banner features the Practical Farmers of Iowa logo on the left, which includes a stylized leaf icon above the text "PRACTICAL FARMERS of Iowa". To the right, the text "2025 Annual Conference" is written in large, bold, orange letters. Below this, the dates "Jan. 10-11" and the location "Iowa Events Center | Des Moines, IA" are listed in dark blue. A central brown banner contains the text: "Join us for three days of learning, sharing knowledge and building connections to foster resilient farms and communities. Visit practicalfarmers.org/annual-conference for updates." At the bottom, there are four small inset photos: a man in a blue shirt pointing at a whiteboard, a woman and a man smiling, a large crowd of people in a hallway, and a group of people talking.

Welcome, New Members!

From May 3, 2024 – July 25, 2024



DISTRICT 1 - NORTHWEST

- Kennedy Drey – Early
- Daniel Drey – Schaller
- Mark Herman – Odebolt
- Ben Jones and Grace Wintz – Linn Grove
- KMR, Kyle Klein – Carroll
- Jim Venner – Breda
- Raymond Wedeking – Nemaha

DISTRICT 2 - NORTH CENTRAL

- Alan Eckhart – State Center
- Staci Freese – Grundy Center
- Steve Rachut – St. Ansgar
- Phil Ruger – Fenton
- Dripwerx Irrigation LLC, Jeffrey Zimmerman – Orchard

DISTRICT 3 - NORTHEAST

- Marggi Ann Albrecht – Jesup
- HACAP Food Reservoir, Aron Brecht – Hiawatha
- Luke Busching – Waverly
- Gary Heims – Delhi
- Loyd Kennedy – Epworth
- Kaitlyn Lutsch – Cedar Rapids
- Darius Nupolu – Cedar Rapids
- Craig Petersen – Sumner

- Diane Schick – Ridgeway
- Benjamin and Faith Scott – Maynard

DISTRICT 4 - SOUTHWEST

- John Dawley – Des Moines
- Tom Feldman – Sheldahl
- Denise Gambs – Red Oak
- Jim Hoflen – Elk Horn
- Jennifer Middleton – Colfax
- Krishna Rai – Des Moines
- Tidal Grow AgriScience, Kevin Steward – Truro
- SWCD, Dallas County, Kelly Thomas – Adel
- Kim and Jerome Wedemeyer – Adair

DISTRICT 5 - SOUTHEAST

- Wayne Meierotto – Salem
- Kylie Slocum – Birmingham
- Christina Van Roekel – Coralville

DISTRICT 6 - OUT OF STATE

- Derek Menold – Princeville, IL
- Terry Rasmussen – Princeville, IL
- Trevor Toland – Macomb, IL
- Larry Tombaugh – Streator, IL
- Airscout, Dan Sutton – Lowell, IN

- Galen Ackerman – Sabetha, KS
- Joe Caulfield – Byron, MN
- Pat Clemens – Chatfield, MN
- Stacy and Kevin Dresow – Lonsdale, MN
- Reed and Denise Duncan – Zumbro Falls, MN
- Rick and Dan Lutzi – Rochester, MN
- Lucas Olen – Mora, MN
- Jason Olson – Blue Earth, MN
- Mitchell Oswald – Brownsdale, MN
- Joshua Pries – Eyota, MN
- Mike Schmidt – Eyota, MN
- Jessica Thomas – Byron, MN
- Noreen Thomas – Moorhead, MN
- Ed Twohey – Stewartville, MN
- Joe Zarling – Plainview, MN
- Scott Dangler – Trumbull, NE
- Tyler Jaeger – Winside, NE
- Kent Kreifels – Syracuse, NE
- Zeb Kreifels – Unadilla, NE
- Gene Pfanstiel – Randolph, NE
- Heather Roller – Hubbardsville, NY
- Darren Gerlach – Menno, SD
- Katharyn Bine – Fairfax, VA
- Brandon and Chelsea Fay – Almond, WI
- Joshua Tranel – Hazel Green, WI



Attendees enjoy a hay rack ride while touring the Kadolph farm near Hubbard, Iowa, on June 22, 2024. The Kadolphs use cover crops on all their acres of no-till corn and soybeans with the goal of improving weed control and building soil health.

GROW YOUR FARM WITH PRACTICAL FARMERS. JOIN OR RENEW TODAY!

Want to join or renew online? Visit practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew.

MEMBER INFORMATION

Contact Name(s)*: _____

Farm or Organization Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____ County: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

* For Farm or Household membership, please list names of all persons included. For Organization membership, you may list up to three contact persons.

JOIN OR RENEW

1. I am joining at the level of:

- Access - \$25
- Individual - \$50
- Farm or Household - \$75
- Organization - \$150
- Lifetime Member* - \$1,200
* See details at bit.ly/PFI-lifetime

3. How many years of farming experience do you have?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11 or more

2. Which category best describes you? (choose one)

- Farmer or farm operator
- Not farming yet, but would like to
- Farmland owner who does not actively farm myself
- Other: _____

4. How did you hear about PFI?

MEMBER BENEFITS

When you join our email discussion groups, you can network, build community and exchange ideas from anywhere, at any time. Sign up for as many groups as you'd like (and be sure to include your email address above)!

- Announcements
- Perspectives
- Field Crops
- Horticulture
- Livestock

Please add my farm to PFI's:

- Local Foods Directory
- Business Directory (Organization members only)

SUSTAIN PRACTICAL FARMERS WITH AN ADDITIONAL DONATION

For the sake of the long-term health and vitality of Practical Farmers of Iowa, we ask you to consider making a donation above and beyond your membership fee. Practical Farmers of Iowa is a 501(c)3 organization. Your gift is tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

I would like to make a one-time, tax-deductible donation to PFI in the amount of:

- \$1,000
- \$500
- \$250
- \$100
- \$50
- \$ _____

Or, make a recurring monthly or quarterly donation. This will be automatically charged to your credit card on the first day of each month or quarter.

- Yes, I would like to give \$ _____
- per month
- OR
- per quarter

PAYMENT

Membership Level\$ _____ per year for _____ year(s) = \$ _____

Additional Donation = \$ _____

TOTAL AMOUNT = \$ _____

- Check or money order is enclosed (Please make payable to "Practical Farmers of Iowa.")
- Credit card (Visa, MasterCard or Discover only)

Name on card _____ Number _____

Exp. Date _____ CVC# (3 digits) _____ Please automatically charge this credit card annually for membership

THE FINAL WORD

This past summer, PFI staff entered a contest at the Iowa State Fair by painting a concrete statue with PFI's visual brand and scenes of the Iowa landscape. The statue won third place, and is now displayed at the PFI office.

Liz Kolbe, PFI's farmer-led education director, wrote about the statue design.

“Our design, titled ‘Building Resilient Farms and Communities’ is created in honor of the over 6,000 members of Practical Farmers of Iowa. With values rooted in curiosity, collaboration and community, the design highlights PFI’s ‘big tent’ – featuring field crops, horticulture, livestock and enhancement of Iowa’s natural resources and ecosystems.

The basket is swathed in PFI’s barn quilt pattern, a nod to the barn quilts adorning the farmsteads of the past and present, and the friends, neighbors and community that value thriving farms. The corn in our design is in memory of long-time PFI member and farmer-leader Dan Specht, who developed, bred and shared his open-pollinated sweet corn, ‘Dan’s Blue-Blond Sweet,’ for over a decade before he died while moving hay bales on his farm in McGregor, Iowa, in 2013. The mottled blue-and-blond ears Dan worked toward include crosses with Hopi blue sweet corn, building on centuries of Indigenous corn breeding.

Like breeding a corn variety, making changes toward a more resilient and sustainable farm takes forethought, intention, support from other farmers and most importantly, time. Not all the ears – or all the farms – will look the same at the beginning or at the end. But in the long run, we hope to see an Iowa with diverse, successful and resilient farms building vibrant communities.”





Practical Farmers of Iowa hosted “PFI Member Day at the Iowa State Fair” on Aug. 13. Many PFI staff attended as well as newer and long-time members. T-shirts were given to members and everyone stuck around until noon for a group photo.

Clockwise from top left: PFI members Mike and Martha Galecki. Members Boone and MaKayla Lord with PFI staff members Steve Carlson and Morgan Jennings. Members Gary and Brenda Gronewold chat with PFI staff member Debra Boekholder. The group stands and smiles in front of the John Deere Agriculture Building.

PRACTICAL FARMERS *of Iowa*

1615 Golden Aspen Drive, Suite 101
Ames, IA 50010

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PAID
Waterloo, IA
Permit No. 901



Decorah Flower Hub

From left to right, Barb Kraus, Clara Muggli-Toyloy and Katie Prochaska are among a growing number of flower farmers in the Decorah area. Read about the flower cooperative they organized on page 26.

Photo courtesy of Clara Muggli-Toyloy