

Summary & Resources - Coleman Crest Farm July 2023 OAK Farmer Field Day



Restoring the Family Farm with Organic Production

“Farming is about building relationships” - to the family legacy on the land, the farm’s ecosystems and how to work within them, the mentors and resource providers, and the customers and markets: this thought was the thread throughout Jim Coleman’s message to field day participants at [Coleman Crest Farm](#) in late July.

The Coleman family history with the Fayette County land runs deep. In March 1888, Jim’s great grandfather James Coleman purchased the land that he and his parents had tilled under enslavement. With the help of loans from the Union Benevolent Society Lodge #28 and local banks, he purchased the parcel of land which is known today as Coleman Crest Farm. The Farm is located in [Utteringtown](#), one of the few free black communities developed in 1869 after the Civil War. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of multiple generations of the Coleman family, the cooperation within Utteringtown’s community of African American families, the Union Benevolent Society’s support of the community’s family and land expenses, and Utteringtown’s [Rosenwald school](#) (1917-1932) more than 300 of James Coleman’s descendants were able to attend college. As Jim explains, “ My great-grandfather used ‘the power of one’ to generate a lasting impact on the lives of more than 300 of his descendants for over a century.” (For those who missed Jim’s rich storytelling of his family history at this field day, [Lisa A Brown’s article](#) shares more details of the Colemans’ family legacy.)

In 2001, Jim and his late wife Cathy, purchased Coleman Crest Farm, returning to Kentucky once or twice a year and dreaming of restoring the family farm one day. In March 2020, after 37 years of marriage, Jim lost Cathy to breast cancer. Instead of surrendering to grief, Jim decided to move forward in their collective dream and the proud legacy of his family; he relocated to his Utteringtown farm and has been tenacious in his work at restoring Coleman Crest Farm. This work is driven by Jim’s goal for the Farm to achieve three primary functions: achieve certified organic crop production, serve as an incubator farm for aspiring farmers and welcome visitors as an agritourism site.

In a century when African American landowners have lost 12 million acres of farmland in the South, Jim’s efforts to retain and restore his family’s land are admirable. “You don’t need 1,000 acres to build your farming business,” Jim encouraged the group. Starting a backyard garden, learning the

operations of farming, and finding a mentor are Jim's recommendations of how to get started. With the support of Ashley C Smith of [Black Soil KY](#), Jim's farming start was celebrated through an on-farm community event; it was thanks to this event and the related public exposure that Jim met some of his farming mentors, Erik Walles, Gayle Tomkinson, and Grant Walles (formerly of *Berries on Bryan Station*). With Grant as Coleman Crest Farm's farm manager and the help of OAK's [Transition Trainer](#) Tony Silvernail and Dr. Shawn Lucas (Kentucky State University), Jim's farm became the first African American owned certified organic vegetable farm in Kentucky in July 2022.

Jim knew from the onset that a successful farm needed a reliable source of water. He quickly went to work, contracting Tom Dugan, a local geologist, to locate the optimal site for tapping into the aquifer of groundwater beneath the farm and installing an on-farm well - Mollie's Well, named for Jim's grandmother. Tapping into a 160 foot deep well with 5 pump stations which feeds 60 lines of irrigation with fresh pure all natural ground water. Jim's 3 acres of cropland have immediate access to the natural water sources on the farm. Jim makes use of a mobile app to control the timing and duration of his well-fed irrigation, and he celebrates the increased value of his family land due to this early investment.

In his third year of production, Jim has brought this season's fields to life with beets, swiss chard, green beans, squash, okra, and potatoes. He favors the heavier crops that can be harvested in the morning and delivered in quantity direct to his markets: restaurants, stores, caterers, and golf courses who appreciate his fresh wholesale deliveries. Jim considers this same-day delivery among his competitive advantages: local, certified organic, and as fresh as possible! And while he acknowledges that a cold storage facility is on his wish list in order to store some of his future harvests, he chooses to focus on the strength of the marketing advantage instead of dwelling on the weakness of what farm infrastructure is not yet in place.

"I'm a businessman who happens to be a farmer - that's how we have to think about ourselves to be successful in the organic farming business. We have customers - and we intend to satisfy their needs; how can we do that in a way that makes them believe that they can't do it without us?" That's where the relationship-building comes in, Jim explained. "I'm approaching them with the message that we're all in this together."

The [pollinators](#), the [life in the soil](#), the [cover crops](#) and sunflowers and zinnias which feed all of them - all of these are part of the relationship-building aspects of Coleman Crest Farm. "We're part of nature - and in farming, we're working with nature- not against it," Jim explained. "This is the stewardship of the organic farmer that my ancestors adopted over the last 135 years" - and the integrity that Jim knows his customers depend upon in his products and his practices.

To work within the organic practices that his land ethic encourages and organic certification requires, Jim plans his crops for the year based on a [crop rotation](#) of plant families. These rotations encourage soil productivity and can reduce weed and pest pressures - and they're required for a [Certified Organic](#) farm. This season-to-season recordkeeping allows Jim easy access to planting and harvest dates, succession timing, and cover crop planning. Jim prefers buckwheat for summer cover cropping, and rye at the end of the fall crop season.

Using loaned equipment from the Walles, Jim has adopted the use of plastic mulch and drip micro-irrigation for his 120-ft beds. After incorporating his cover crops with his Land Pride tiller, Jim

uses a raised bed mulch-layer to form and cover his beds, lay the drip irrigation underneath, and secure the plastic along the side furrows. Jim lays landscape fabric in the paths between rows, ensuring that all the soil is covered and protected from erosion and that weeds have a lesser chance of taking over the crops. “Like my daddy would say,” Jim cautioned, “weeding is hustling backwards.” Jim’s polyplanter punctures the plastic mulch, drops 2 seeds in the hole, and applies pressure to the seeds for firm seed-to-soil contact. Jim noted that certified organic practices require that any plastic mulch or landscape fabric is removed at the end of each growing season, so the plastic doesn’t degrade into the soil.

Another piece of equipment and farmer-to-farmer relationship highlighted at the field day was the custom-designed three-wheel tractor made and operated by Dr. John Wilhoit of [Thistle’s End Farm](#). Jim enlisted the use of Dr. Wilhoit’s tractor for potato planting, and the demonstration was fascinating! Once the operator steers the tractor down the length of the bed to form a first furrow, the machine can follow the furrow down the next pass while the operator leaves the steering wheel to drop potatoes into the feeding tube. Brilliant! (See Dr. John Wilhoit’s explanation of the tractor during [this #OAK2022 Fam Hacks Panel](#), starting at 27:50)

Yet, of all Jim’s tools and equipment, it’s his Kubota tractor and Land Pride rotary mower that offers him the most satisfaction: “I have about 5 hours of mowing to do at a time, so it gives me time to think, to strategize - and it’s relaxing.” Planning ahead, developing a strategic plan is a lesson Jim reiterated for others as a take-home message. “What will you need 3 to 5 years from now?” Jim suggested, “because that is how you should build your farm. Build your storage shed 5 times larger than you need now. Buy the bigger tractor. Invest for the future.” (See Jim and Coleman Crest Farm featured in [this Kubota Country video](#).)

Jim admitted that he could have saved money in his startup investments if he had learned more about the funding opportunities available in Kentucky and through the US Department of Agriculture’s programs (see below). He encouraged new and beginning farmers to learn all they could and to use the partnerships, resources and funding available, and he offered tips of marketing as well.

“With social media, anyone can be a celebrity! We all have a story, and we need to sell that story. If you have something new happening on your farm, make it a big day,” Jim suggested. “Invite the community. Build those relationships, and help people to learn your farm’s name.

“When my customers buy this local, organic, fresh and clean produce from me, I want them to remember ‘Coleman Crest Farm.’ And the next time they’re looking for an organic, fresh, clean vegetable, I want them to think, ‘I want a Coleman Crest vegetable.’ That’s the relationship that offers the competitive advantage.”

OAK is grateful to Jim Coleman and the entire team at Coleman Crest Farm for the opportunity to tour and learn about his family farm. Our community of farmers and ag professionals were engaged and inspired!

This Field Day was held in collaboration with Grow Appalachia as part of their Beginning Farmer Rancher Program Development Grant.

Resource Links:

- **OAK resources:**
 - [Join OAK today!](#)
 - [Find-A-Farm Directory](#) - OAK Family Farm Members
 - **Asterisks below indicate OAK member discounts**
 - [OAK YouTube](#) farmer resources / conference and field day playlists
 - [OAK Transition Trainer](#) - for assistance with, or info on certifying organic
 - [USDA's National Organic Program](#) and [OMRI-listed products](#) for compliance
 - [OAK Field Days! Register NOW!*](#)
- [Grow Appalachia](#)
 - [Farmer Development](#) - [Chris McKenzie](#)
 - [Social Enterprise](#) - [Kayla Preston](#)
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) [Organic Marketing Program](#) - [Abigale George](#)
- Suppliers / Products
 - [Suppliers and Farm Resources](#) on OAK's Find-A-Farm Directory
 - Grow Appalachia [Growing Supplies](#)
 - [Earth Tools*](#)
 - [Johnny's Selected Seeds*](#) (Jim's preferred seed source)
- Potential Funding Resources
 - Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development ([KCARD](#))
 - Free [business planning](#) for Kentucky farms and agribusinesses
 - [Funding assistance and grant information](#) (Kentucky and beyond)
 - Sign up under "GET UPDATES" on [KCARD website](#) to receive e-newsletters
 - [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)-Kentucky](#) - [Joe Ulrich](#)
 - [A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers](#)
 - [EQIP - High Tunnel Initiative](#)
 - [High Tunnel System - NRCS_KY](#)
 - [Microirrigation - NRCS_KY](#)
 - [Roof Runoff Structure - NRCS_KY](#)
 - [Organic Management NRCS Conservation Practice Standard - Coming Soon: In Development](#)
 - [Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition](#)
 - [SOAR loan](#) - southern and eastern KY
 - [KSU Small-Scale Farm Grant](#)
 - [County Ag Investment Program \(CAIP\)](#) grant: county-specific! Ask your County Cooperative Extension Agent
- Soil Health Resources:
 - Soul Fire Farm's [How Alive Is My Soil?](#)
 - [Cover Crops for Sustainable Crop Production](#) - Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
 - [Building Soils for Better Crops](#) - Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
 - [Cornell Soil Health Manual](#) - Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

- [Building Soil Health in the South](#) - Organic Farming Research Foundation
- Crop Production Resources:
 - [General Production Resources | Center for Crop Diversification](#)
 - [Organic Agriculture | Center for Crop Diversification](#)
 - [Crop Rotation on Organic Farms SARE](#)
 - Crop Planning Software:
 - [Tend - Organic Farm Management Software](#)
 - [COG Pro - Recordkeeping for Organic Certification](#)
- Market-Specific Resources
 - KDA's [Kentucky Farmers' Market Manual and Resource Guide](#)
 - [MarketReady Producer Training Program](#) - wholesale and institutional market assistance