

Summary & Resources - Kentucky State University Harold R Benson Research and Demonstration Farm July 2026 OAK Farmer Field Day



Blooms, Bees and Biodiversity for Thriving Farms

A summer Field Day in Frankfort gave OAK and Kentucky State University (KSU) a chance to highlight the benefits of community for farmer sharing, for pollinator and conservation habitat and for strengthening partnerships. The benefits of interdependence and mutual flourishing were on display for the dozens of Field Day attendees, from the connection between OAK, KSU, USDA organizations and their farmer networks to the on-farm ecological systems. Participants caught a glimpse into the KSU apiary, where tens of thousands of honeybees collaborate for the common good, and they explored KSU's organic crop fields and research acreage, where blooming native plants, cut flowers and edible herbs support the nutritional needs of humans and non-humans alike.

As an outreach component of the KSU Land Grant Program, the Cooperative Extension Program provides educational and research opportunities to KSU faculty, staff, students and the public, with a mission to improve quality of life and strengthen farm families and their communities. KSU Extension Associates and Research Assistants shared insights into several research projects at the Harold R. Benson Research and Demonstration Farm, including effective weed control in organic cut-flower production, improved pollinator habitat establishment practices and management of a honeybee apiary.

Weed Pressure: Perennial Challenge to Annual Cut Flower Production

Seun Mofikoya and Linelle Rivera-Rodriguez, KSU Research and Extension Associates, demonstrated the use of wood mulch, landscape fabric and organic herbicides in multiple beds of cut flower production. Their early results (one growing season) show wood mulch as the preferred weed-suppression technique, especially given its added benefits: the decomposing organic matter feeds the soil and helps maintain soil moisture and temperature. Woven ground cover is effective for weed control (except Johnsongrass), but the soil conditions appear dry with reduced microbial life due to high temperatures. An organic herbicide treatment was delayed due to hot, rainy conditions, so those results are pending.

Linelle and Seun are also reviewing how these weed control methods affect flower yield, bloom quality and color and post-harvest vase life. Keep an eye on the OAK newsletter for future reports from their ongoing research.

Preparing for Success: Establishing Native Pollinator Habitat

Farmers and landowners struggle to suppress weeds organically when establishing pollinator plantings with grasses and forbs, so Extension Associate Kristin Conrad's research stimulated conversation and reflection on how best to prepare a site for these slow-to-establish native plantings. To evaluate native seed establishment, ongoing weed pressure and native bee visitation, Kristin's research plot includes a variety of cover crops, tillage passes and herbicide treatments to support the successful growth of the 30+ native varieties in the pollinator mix. Overcoming the heavy competition of tall fescue, Johnsongrass and Kentucky bluegrass has proven challenging for KSU's chosen research treatments, and the take-home message was to practice patience and use a trial-and-error approach for each landowner's specific conditions.

"What you start with matters," advised State Biologist Christy Wampler of Kentucky's USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), explaining that the treatment method and successful timing depend heavily on each site's existing vegetation, specific goals and available time and resources. Christy and Kristin referenced two publications rich with information for site preparation and species selection: the Xerces Society's [Comparative Review of Organic Site Preparation Methods](#) and the [Kentucky Pollinator Handbook](#).

The Xerces publication provides multiple approaches to site preparation that avoid conventional herbicides, including when each method should or should not be used, the relative cost of materials and region-specific details. Combining this document and the KSU research, Kristin favored solarization as a good way to begin in small-scale plots: killing existing vegetation to prepare for native plant installation. For successful establishment, strip-mowing later in the season can help reduce weed seed establishment and encourage root development in the desirable native plants, while leaving some blooms for pollinators. Planning for season-long blooms is a key aspect of pollinator habitat, Christy added, referencing the *Kentucky Pollinator Handbook's* charts for native plants that bloom early in the spring, mid-season during the heat of summer and late in summer to early fall, when the dearth of blooming vegetation reduces nectar sources.

NRCS supports landowners with multiple opportunities for assistance, including technical support for conservation planning on an entire farm or for individual practices like conservation cover for pollinator habitat, and cost-share programs to help landowners integrate the practices into their land management. OAK partners with NRCS for conservation support through specific recommendations, such as highlighting [NRCS Practices that support pollinators](#) or through [free farm visits and one-on-one calls](#) to help navigate the USDA programs.

Getting Started with Honeybees

Increasing crop pollination and yields while providing an additional value-added product of jarred honey entices many farmers to consider adding honeybees on their land. Whether adding the hives as an additional enterprise or partnering with a local beekeeper to house hives on the land, farmers

can benefit from the recommendations that Kenny Holbrook (KSU Research Assistant in Apiculture) shared for getting started with an apiary. His considerations include local zoning or HOA restrictions, beekeeper training and time, support/connections with mentor beekeepers or local beekeeping associations and equipment needs. Kenny added many of these recommendations to the *Starting an Apiary* handout (linked below).

Integrating bees into the landscape requires thoughtful analysis of forage that provides flowering plants throughout the growing season, spring through fall, which could include cash crops, cover crops, pollinator habitat plantings or existing native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Additional site considerations include wind protection, access to water, beekeeper accessibility and isolation from high-traffic areas or potential chemical contamination. The Kentucky State Beekeepers Association offers resources and training for new and existing beekeepers, and the *Kentucky Pollinator Handbook* provides bloom charts, native plant considerations and crop pollination guidance (linked below).

Gratitude

OAK is grateful to Seun Mofikoya, Linelle Rivera-Rodriguez, Kristin Conrad, Kenny Holbrook and the KSU Benson Farm crew for their time and generous efforts for this Field Day, to Christy Wampler for participant support and to all the farmers and ag professionals who took time out of their busy schedules to share in the learning and conversation.

Related Resource Links:

OAK Resources:

- [OAK Farmer Field Days](#) - Hosted on working farms, these events highlight organic crop and livestock systems and best practices in production, marketing, business and resilience on Kentucky farms. The 2026 Field Day calendar offers events from May to October, on-farm and online!
- [Organic Production Assistance Program](#) - Organic production consultation services provide dedicated technical assistance to Kentucky farmers who are currently using or interested in adopting or expanding organic practices.
- [OAK Transition Program](#) - Organic transition specialists assist farmers interested in transitioning to USDA-certified organic production. Organic specialists are available for one-on-one consultations, providing a personal level of service and technical assistance on-site, at the farmer's convenience.
- [On-Farm Conservation](#) - This program provides outreach and education for farm-based conservation on owned or leased land. Eligible participants are Kentucky farmers and landowners with production or subsistence farms, urban or rural growing spaces, community-run projects or privately managed lands. OAK's Conservation Outreach Coordinator, Mad Marchal, is available to connect Kentuckians to local NRCS field staff, to reduce barriers to entry into NRCS programs and to offer logistical support and conservation education. Contact Mad at mad@oak-ky.org or (502) 509-9839 or [schedule a free call](#).
 - [Conservation Funding Opportunity](#): Eligible Kentucky farmers can apply this fall for financial and technical assistance with on-farm conservation practices through funding from a new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). [Grow Appalachia](#) and OAK are stewarding this new partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that will advance soil health, conservation and

weather-resilient practices for Kentucky farmers and landowners. Contact Mad at mad@oak-ky.org for details.

- [Soil Health Project](#) - OAK and partners are working with farmers and buyers in Kentucky to promote the adoption of organic farming practices and to develop markets for commodities grown and raised in ways that improve whole-farm resilience, soil health and ecosystem services. This project is part of the USDA's Advancing Markets for Producers initiative and runs through August 2028.
- [OAK Conference](#) - OAK's annual conference includes a growing audience of hundreds of Kentuckians and neighbors active in the region's food systems: farmers, researchers, nonprofit professionals, federal and state agency partners, technical service providers and conscious consumers working collectively to build a resilient local food system for all. Collaboration among these diverse voices, grounded in the connection to Kentucky farms, soil and communities, provides a rich foundation for learning and growth. Mark your calendar to join us in Cave City, KY, on January 29-30, 2027, and keep an eye out for more details in summer 2026.
- [Kentucky Farm Share Coalition](#) (KYFSC) creates market opportunities for Kentucky farms growing for community-supported agriculture (CSA), a weekly box subscription of the farm's harvest. KYFSC partners with farms and employers to facilitate workplace CSA programs that incentivize employees to purchase CSA. Learn more today!
- [Join OAK today!](#) The organic and sustainable farming network in Kentucky is growing. Together, we are creating a thriving regional food and farming network. Your support and participation help provide resources to farmers, inspire community members and enhance organics across KY!
- [Sign up for OAK newsletters](#) - For farmers and consumers, OAK offers a variety of regular communications to stay connected to Kentucky food and farming news, research and events.

Kentucky State University (KSU) Resources

- [Kentucky State University Cooperative Extension](#)
- [KSU Small-Scale Farm Grant](#)
- [From Weeds to Blooms - Enhancing Organic Cut Flower Production Through Effective Weed Control](#)
- [Improving Pollinator Habitat Establishment Practices](#)
- [Starting an Apiary: A Beginner's Guide for Organic Farmers](#)

Pollinator and Related Conservation Resources

- [Kentucky Pollinator Handbook - KY NRCS](#) (being updated in 2026)
- [KSU Field Day Handout - Conservation Practices](#)
- Xerces Society publications:
 - [Organic Site Preparation Methods](#) (overview)
 - [Organic Site Preparation for Wildflower Establishment](#) (full download)
 - [Pollinator Conservation Habitat Installation Guides](#)
- USDA:
 - [USDA National Organic Program](#)
 - [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#)
 - [EQIP Funding for Organic Farmers](#)
 - [EQIP Homepage](#)
 - [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#)
 - [Is CSP Right For Me?](#)

- [Get Started! A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers](#)

Cut Flower Resources

- [Cut Flowers | Center for Crop Diversification](#) - University of Kentucky
- [2026 KY Grown Cut Flower Month Marketing Package](#)

Beekeeping Resources

- Kentucky State Beekeepers Association [Resources for Beekeepers](#), including [Kentucky Beekeeping Calendar](#)
- [Native Plants for Summer and Fall Honey Bee Forage](#) (NRCS-Maryland)
- [Kentucky Pollinator Handbook - KY NRCS](#) (being updated in 2026)

Soil Health Resources:

- Soul Fire Farm's [How Alive Is My Soil?](#)
- [Cover Crops for Sustainable Crop Production](#) - Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
- [Managing Cover Crops Profitably](#) and [Building Soils for Better Crops](#) - SARE
- [Cornell Soil Health Manual](#) - Cornell University's College of Ag and Life Sciences
- [Building Soil Health in the South](#) - Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)

Funding /Technical Assistance Resources and Service Providers

- 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
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
 - Read this first! [A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers](#)
 - USDA [Farm Service Agency \(FSA\)-Kentucky](#)
 - [How to Start a Farm: Beginning Farmers and Ranchers](#)
 - Find your county's office in [West Kentucky](#) or [East Kentucky](#)
 - [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)-Kentucky](#)
- [Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund \(KADF\)](#) - Apply by October 30 for [2026 programs](#)
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA)
 - [Organic Marketing Program](#)
- Grants:
 - [SOAR loan](#) - southern and eastern KY
 - [KSU Small-Scale Farm Grant](#)
 - [County Agricultural Incentives Program \(CAIP\)](#) grant: county-specific! Ask your County Cooperative Extension Agent or Conservation District; more information [here](#)
 - [Small Scale On-Farm Water Management](#) - Kentucky Horticulture Council