

Summary & Resources - Loving Farm September 2026 OAK Field Day

Working with Nature and Creativity in Conservation



Event Summary

Perrie Williamson and Marietta Labbato shared Loving Farm's intentional approach to land stewardship and a simple farming lifestyle during an early September Field Day. Growing and sharing beautiful flowers, learning from the land and making just enough to live simply is at the core of the Fleming County cut-flower business. With support from NRCS and related conservation practices and resources, Perrie and Marietta are investing in the land and the future as they plant diversity, cultivate partnerships and grow their understanding and practice of ecology and interdependence.

The field day participants toured the farm in two groups, each led by a Loving Farm co-owner and a horticulture or conservation partner. Marietta and Shari Dutton, University of Kentucky Horticulture Extension Associate, led Field Day participants through the farm's flower field and infrastructure, discussing cut flower production and the selection and cultivation of plant varieties and native species for market. Perrie and Mad Marchal, OAK Conservation Outreach Coordinator, shared the farm's conservation highlights on a full tour of the six-acre property.

Conservation at Loving Farm

Pollinator Plantings

Perrie and Mad's group visited a half-acre pollinator stand, planted in the spring of 2025 with help from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). To prepare the land without chemical inputs, a neighbor tilled the ground and then brought a goat to graze the remaining foliage before a second tilling. NRCS recommended using "Pollinator Mix 3" to seed this area, including little bluestem, side-oats grama, Virginia wildrye, black-eyed susan, bergamot, purple coneflower, Illinois bundleflower, rigid goldenrod, greyheaded coneflower, New England aster, partridge pea and false sunflower. Marietta and Perrie seeded once in spring 2025 and again in 2026 and have managed weeds by hand-pulling undesirable plants, like

ragweed, marestail and Johnsongrass. In addition to the seeded plants they've already seen in bloom, like black-eyed susan, bergamot, purple coneflower and New England aster, locally established pollinator plants have returned as well, including goldenrod and chicory.

Establishing this half-acre plot is part of Loving Farm's Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contract with the NRCS, with 2026 as the second year of their five-year commitment to establish the pollinator stand. Perrie is excited to see which additional native plants, existing and seeded, will show themselves after their roots are established and their flowering begins.

No-Mow Riparian Buffer And On-Farm Water

Field Day participants walked a gently sloping field that ends at a stretch of Johnson Creek running along the property's border. This area has not been mowed since 2022 and has been spot-planted with native trees and plants such as amaranth and boneset. The wild vegetation has grown up in this area, including desirable species such as chestnut trees, ironweed and goldenrod. The area serves as a riparian buffer along the creek, filtering water, reducing sediment and minimizing erosion.

Marietta and Perrie planted vegetable beds alongside their no-mow area with crops like beets, carrots, lettuce and a buckwheat cover crop in 2026. These rows are irrigated with water from two rainwater catchment tanks connected to their dried-flower trailer's gutters. Together, these two tanks hold 2,000 gallons of water and are also part of Loving Farm's CSP contract with NRCS.

Filter strip for herbicide drift

Across a currently abandoned railroad track that borders Loving Farm is a conventional row crop farm. In 2023, this neighboring farm applied herbicides to their crops, and Loving Farm's property received some of the herbicide's windborne drift, which killed many crops in their main production beds. To reduce the risk of this happening again, as well as any risk of pesticides sprayed along the railroad tracks, Loving Farm began installing a filter strip of bushy plants and grasses. In 2026, they planted hazelnuts, sumac and native grasses, which can also help support the railroad bank from erosion.

Cut Flower and Native Plant Production

Production Field

Marietta and Shari led their groups through Loving Farm's primary flower garden, which was previously a compacted lawn that Perrie and Marietta renovated to establish beds and restore the soil. Operating on a small, human-powered scale by choice, Loving Farm minimizes costs and repairs by farming without a tractor. Working with a team of local volunteers attracted through the farm's newsletter, they broke up compacted soils, laid cardboard to smother weeds and grass and added compost, manure and soil amendments before seeding the whole area in cover crops. (NOTE: a [cover crop seeding-rate calculator](#) lets growers enter plot dimensions and cover crop type for an exact seeding rate.) After a technical assistance visit from OAK's Organic Production Specialist, original horseshoe-shaped beds were reconfigured into rows of

30-ft-long beds, increasing bed productivity and efficiency. The beds contain deliberately mixed plantings rather than monocrop rows. Perrie and Marietta planted comfrey along the edge to prevent grass from invading and as a future "chop-and-drop" natural fertilizer source. With cost-share assistance from the County Agricultural Incentives Program (CAIP) and materials/installation support from Grow Appalachia, Marietta and Perrie added drip line irrigation throughout the beds.

On-Farm Infrastructure and Plant Propagation

The Loving Farm duo repurposed a house-trailer on their land for post-harvest processing, seed starting and cold storage for cool-season blooms in a refrigerator. Warm-season flowers (zinnia, for example) need warmer post-harvest storage temperatures, so they purchased a mobile cold storage unit to provide warmer-temperature storage with a KSU Small-Scale Farm Grant. Loving Farm creates many value-added dry flower products such as wreaths, hangings, sprays and catnip kickers, so they also installed an exhaust fan to control humidity in a drying room.

For seed-starting, they set up heat mats on shelves from a big-box store. Shari Dutton shared that she's found a wider shelf unit (Costco) that fits standard 1020 seed trays lengthwise, allowing six trays per shelf instead of two per shelf on typical units. Using shop lights hung above the shelves provides light for germination, and Shari advised hanging as many lights as needed to prevent seedlings from leaning, which can weaken a plant's structure even into maturity and increase its susceptibility to collapse in high winds. Shari offered a final seed-starting tip for using heat mats with cool- and warm-season seeds simultaneously: placing foam core underneath the cool-season plant trays as a buffer from the heat.

The farm acquired a fully assembled greenhouse funded by a grant from Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) and purchased it locally (TZ Sheds). The greenhouse has a temperature, light and humidity HOBO sensor, provided by UK Horticulture Extension through a Controlled-Environment Agriculture "Pathways" program, to help them improve their use of the greenhouse over time.

Starting Native Plants from Seed and Rhizomes

Shari Dutton provided multiple lessons and handouts for managing native plants for cut stems and flowers and floral arrangements. Starting native seeds can be tricky due to natural dormancy needs that support germination. Shari offered tips on artificial seed stratification using a folded damp paper towel. For plants propagated through their rhizome root systems, Shari demonstrated how to dig and cut the rhizome runners to start new plants, advising growers to "become a root nerd; roots can tell you so much about a plant's health, its growing habits and needs, whether it's annual or perennial." Shari referenced the Prairie Moon Nursery website as a great resource for strategies that "unlock" the dormancy mechanism for quicker and more consistent germination. Find these resources linked below.

Coppicing for Straight Stem Production

To demonstrate coppicing, Shari presented a 3- to 4-year-old redbud with multiple stems growing from its base. At this age, the plant has a strong carbon reserve from a developed root

system, so it can withstand the abuse of pruning. This coppicing is an Old World management technique for forest use in basketry, building materials, fencing, etc., without harming plants or damaging genetics. Coppicing keeps woody material vegetative. Shari advised cutting the redbud down to 2 inches above the soil line once it goes into dormancy and all leaves have fallen. (It's important that the plant is fully dormant, as pruning can initiate growth). Redbuds bloom on old wood (second year or later), so coppicing will encourage a straight stem to regrow and make it more suitable for cut-flower use. Pruning can be alternated every other year: one year, the straight stem develops, and the next year, it blooms.

Reach out!

If you have additional questions about conservation practices and the Natural Resources Conservation Service programs, please reach out to Mad Marchal, [OAK's Conservation Outreach Coordinator](#). You can also directly contact NRCS by finding your [local NRCS office](#).

Gratitude

OAK is grateful to Mariette Labbato and Perrie Williamson for sharing Loving Farm with us during this event and for the labor and thought that went into preparing. We also appreciate [Shari Dutton, UK Horticulture Extension Associate](#), for sharing her vast knowledge during the field day and for being an integral partner in creating this event. Thanks to the Plant-Based Junk food cart for providing lunch after the event.

Thanks to the wide group of ag service providers who attended this event alongside farmers: Kentucky Department of Agriculture's Organic Program and Produce Safety Program, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Fleming County Conservation District, Grow Appalachia and Kentucky State University.

This event was supported by a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

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 through 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.

- The [Midwest Transition to Organic Partnership Program \(TOPP\)](#) is a coalition of partners across 11 states providing mentorship, technical assistance, and wrap-around support for transitioning and existing organic producers.
- [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 [schedule a free call](#).
 - [Conservation Funding Opportunity](#): Eligible Kentucky farmers can **apply by September 25, 2026**, 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) to 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 watch for registration, farmer/grower scholarships and event details in October 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.

Native Plant and Soil Health Resources

- [Native Plant Suppliers & Service Providers](#) - Kentucky Native Plant Society
- [Pollinator-Friendly Native Plant Lists](#) - Xerces Society
- [Invasive Plant Threats - Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet](#)
- [Invasive Species Fact Sheets](#) - Kentucky Invasive Plant Council
- [Kentucky's Native Alternatives to Invasive Plants](#) - If looking to replace invasives with other plants, this is a great place to start.
- 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
- [Cover Crop Calculator](#) - UK Center for Crop Diversification
- [Cornell Soil Health Manual](#) - Cornell University's College of Ag and Life Sciences
- [Building Soil Health in the South](#) - Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)
- Native Plant Production Resources
 - [Starting Native Plants - artificial seed stratification](#) - Shari Dutton, UK
 - [Vegetative propagation from rhizomes](#) - Shari Dutton, UK
 - [Coppicing and Pollarding](#) - Shari Dutton, UK
 - [Loving Farm Native Perennials with Commercial Cut Flower Potential](#)
 - [How to Germinate Native Seeds](#) - Prairie Moon Nursery
 - [Woody Cut Stems for Growers and Florists](#) book
- Crop Production:
 - [Organic Agriculture | Center for Crop Diversification](#)
 - [Crop Rotation on Organic Farms | SARE](#)
 - [High Tunnel Production Resources](#) - University of Kentucky Extension
 - [Production Manual](#) of the Organic Farming Unit at the University of Kentucky
 - [KY Cut Flower Grower Resources](#) – Kentucky Horticulture Council

Funding /Technical Assistance Resources and Service Providers

***These asterisks indicate programs referenced during the Loving Farm Field Day as funding resources they have utilized to scale up their business and education.*

- ** Grow Appalachia addresses food insecurity throughout central Appalachia through home and community garden initiatives, foodways, farming and hunger relief programming. As a [Strategic Initiative of Berea College](#), Grow Appalachia partners with organizations, communities and families in Appalachia to create healthy, resilient and economically viable food systems.
 - [Beginning Farmer Series](#) and [Garden Grants](#)
 - [High Tunnels and Growing Supplies](#) - [Social Enterprise](#) - [Kayla Preston](#)
- 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](#)
 - ** [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)-Kentucky](#)
 - USDA Rural Development [Rural Energy for America Program](#) - *currently offering loans only, but a good resource for grant funds when available*
- [Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund \(KADF\)](#) - **Apply by October 30 for 2026 programs**
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) [Organic Marketing Program](#)
- Grants:
 - [SOAR farm 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](#) and ** [KY GreenWorks](#) (mileage reimbursement, trainings, protective gear and more) - Kentucky Horticulture Council
 - ** [Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA](#) Farm Infrastructure Grant and Supporting Beginning Farmers Grant
- ** [Kentucky Farm Launch \(Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program\)](#) - check back for 2027 Cohort

USDA-NRCS and Other Conservation Resources

- [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](#)
 - Cost-Share Practices: [Hedgerow Planting](#), [Invasive Species Removal \(Brush Management\)](#), [Tree-Shrub Establishment](#), [Tree Shrub Site Preparation](#), [Tree and Shrub Pruning](#), [Riparian Forest Buffer](#), [Riparian Herbaceous Cover](#), [Conservation Cover](#), [Wildlife Habitat Planting](#)
 - [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) – [EQIP for Organic Farmers](#)
 - [Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\)](#) – [“Is CSP Right For Me?”](#)
 - Organic Management Plan (823): [2024 Organic Farmers Association Factsheet](#)
 - 'Historically Underserved' Farmers: [“A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers”](#)
- [USDA National Organic Program](#)
- [Kentucky Conservation Districts](#)
- [Kentucky Prescribed Fire Council](#)