Summary & Resources - Seedleaf's Headwater Farm
October 2026 OAK Field Day

Whole Farm Diversity: Perennials, Pollinators and Community

Event Summary

In a lovely fall Field Day, participants explored Headwater Farm's conservation practices, market gardens, beginning compost site, beehives and high tunnel. They heard Seedleaf's lessons learned from beginning an orchard, building partnerships for success and growing food and fellowship on shared land.

Seedleaf Executive Director Christine Smith led participants around the farm, highlighting how these many aspects of the farm are the Seedleaf mission in practice. Headwater Farm Manager James Hunter and Farm Assistant Connor Mason joined Christine to share the day-to-day life and on-the-ground practices of the farm.

Additional presenters included Monet Proctor, who spoke on her experience as a Seedleaf Market Gardener; Mark Coyne, representing Fayette County Conservation District; Dr. Tammy Horn Potter, KSU Extension, who offered native bee and honeybee education; and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) representatives, who explained conservation practices supported by their programs.

Seedleaf History

Lexington nonprofit Seedleaf was started in 2007 by Ryan Koch with a vision to nurture beauty in downtown Lexington by using overlooked and neglected properties to create a space for food access - where anyone could harvest what they needed. Through this effort, Seedleaf strove to give people meaningful work: not just work you do to get paid, but something engaging for body, spirit and community.

Seedleaf started with one garden, the London Ferrell Community Garden, and now operates 10 community garden spaces throughout Lexington. Seedleaf leans heavily on friends, partners and community. Headwater Farm, acquired by Seedleaf in 2023, gets its name from the creek that passes through the farm and forms the headwaters of the North Fork of Elkhorn Creek.

Balancing Conservation and Crop Development

Riparian Buffers

The Elkhorn Creek running through Headwater Farm reminds its caretakers of the importance of stewarding on-farm water quality. Seedleaf has planted willows along the creek to help filter out sediment. Seedleaf sees the potential of harvesting from the willows, once established, for artisans who use branches for basketry and handcrafts.

This riparian buffer, where the willow is planted alongside the creek, could be extended to further protect the water and wildlife in the area. By removing invasive species and replacing them with desirable native species, the conservation benefits could be expanded while also tailoring the plantings to possible edible and marketable goods.

OAK's Conservation Coordinator Mad Marchal described the technical assistance and cost-share programs available from NRCS to support riparian buffer development that uses native species diversity for erosion control and water quality, wildlife support and other natural resource concerns. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS may support Riparian Buffer Establishment.

Orchard Establishment

The orchard at Headwater Farm consists of 350 trees and shrubs of various species, planted in 2024. Some of the varieties planted to establish the orchard include paw paws, persimmons, hazelnuts, apple trees, peach trees, blackberries and aronia berries (chokeberry). Any non-native species grown in the orchard are substituting for a less-desirable native species (e.g., a cultivated apple for a crab apple) to improve market crop selection while ensuring species diversity. Native forbs planted around the trees attract beneficial insects and outcompete Johnson grass, but they have made maintenance difficult. Seedleaf is concerned these native forbs might be competing for light and water and preventing good airflow for the tree trunks.

The orchard borders neighboring property and railroad tracks, where native trees like black cherries and oak trees grow. Seedleaf planted American-Chinese hybrid chestnut trees, dogwoods and bur oaks along this wooded edge for increased native species diversity.

While native perennials thrive easily in the region, non-native tree fruits like peaches and apples require specific management in this biome. UK is currently researching adapted varieties and high-density planting systems designed to make both organic and conventional spray applications more efficient and cost-effective. OAK highly recommends reaching out to the local extension office when designing these systems. Additionally, UK's Farm Launch resources and UK Sustainable Fruit Production website are great online resources for perennial crop production, site selection, crop planning and variety selection.

OAK's Conservation Coordinator Mad Marchal is available to share more about the technical assistance and cost-share programs that support tree- and shrub-planting projects for native species diversity, erosion control and water quality, wildlife support and other natural resource concerns. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS may support Tree and Shrub Establishment (minimum area of 1/10-acre) and Tree and Shrub Site Preparation.

High Tunnel

Grow Appalachia* helped Seedleaf to acquire and construct a high tunnel to extend the growing season and protect high-value crops that are more susceptible to disease. With two layers of plastic and an air blower providing insulation between them, the tunnel offers cool-season protection for plants and helps to avoid the temperature shifts that fickle Kentucky winters can bring.

Fluctuating nighttime low temperatures and sunny daytime temperatures can damage plants as much as consistent cold temperatures. Roll-up sides allow for airflow and ventilation, as well as an additional way to regulate temperatures. Peak vents above the end wall doors can also help with temperatures. The Center for Crop Diversification at UK publishes high tunnel and field planting calendars to help growers determine appropriate planting schedules.

OAK's Conservation Coordinator Mad Marchal can share more about the technical assistance and cost-share programs available to build high tunnels, roof runoff (water catchment) and microirrigation. The NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) may support these practices.

*NOTE: Grow Appalachia no longer constructs high tunnels, but does offer technical support and growing supplies.

Pollinators

Dr. Tammy Horn Potter provided a look at housing structures for honeybees, mason bees and bumblebees, highlighting these pollinators' benefits and life cycles. Honeybees offer diverse agricultural benefits as essential food pollinators, providing honey and value-added products. They are generalists, so they pollinate a wide variety of plants. If a farm has pollination needs for a large crop size, honeybees are helpful, but native bees are essential.
Mason bees offer early spring and summer pollination, so they are critically important for spring crops, pollinating as early as February. Bumblebees are essential for tomatoes and blueberries.
You can purchase bee houses/hives for all of these bees, and you can encourage bumblebees by simply leaving shallow areas of bare dirt, as they are ground nesters.

Dr. Potter recommends the Kentucky State Beekeepers Association's fall annual meeting in Morehead on November 7.

Market Garden Plots

Since 2018, Seedleaf has worked with adults who want to grow food to sell at local farmers' markets. The program has grown into an annual offering, with classes from September through March that provide hands-on field learning, guest speakers on food, safety, business planning, market

presentation and customer-based development. Seedleaf offers stipends to make attendance accessible. After attending this program, serious gardeners are invited to steward a half-acre plot at Headwater Farm to 'incubate' their farm business. Monet Proctor shared her experience in the Market Gardener program, including farming at Headwater Farm, and how that work has encouraged her to build her own family farm.

Conservation District Programs

Seedleaf partners with the Fayette County Conservation District for education and conservation initiatives. Established statewide in the 1930s following the Dust Bowl era, conservation districts exist in every county in Kentucky. Funding and staffing differ from county to county, but all of them provide farmers access to conservation education and assistance. The County Agricultural Incentives Program (CAIP) grant is county-specific; ask your County Cooperative Extension Agent or Conservation District. Find more about the Conservation District Programs at their website: www.kyfccd.org.

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 Christine Smith, James Hunter and Connor Mason for sharing Headwater Farm with us during this event and for the labor and thought that went into preparing for it. We also appreciate our guest speakers, Mark Coyne, Tammy Potter and Monet Proctor for sharing their experience and knowledge with participants.

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:

- 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 schedule a free call.
    - Conservation Funding Opportunity: Eligible Kentucky farmers can apply 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.
- 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 2027 Field Day calendar will be released in early 2027; watch the website and OAK newsletters for updates.
- 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. **Plan to join us in Cave City, KY, on January 29-30, 2027. Registration is open, and scholarships are available.**
- 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

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