



JUST PICKED!

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Progress Report on OFGA’s 3-year priorities

by Amy Bacigalupo, OFGA Board Chair

In late 2021 and early 2022, OFGA members responded to surveys, took part in interviews, and participated in long range planning meetings. The data from this process were shared with members as a [report of findings](#) in February 2022. One of the key findings was that OFGA has many members who are knowledgeable and experienced organic fruit growers. To build on this knowledge the following three-year objectives were prioritized:

Objective 1 – Complete five organic fruit research projects adding to the knowledge of ‘best practices’ for greater viability and success of organic fruit growers.

Objective 2 – Increase OFGA membership by 100 new

members by the end of 2024.

Objective 3 – Increase OFGA’s organizational capacity and effectiveness by the end of 2024.

Due to the hard work of OFGA’s board and with Chris as our new coordinator progress has been made on all of these objectives in 2022.

Fire Blight Research Project - In December 2022, OFGA started a research project with Leslie Holland and her lab to look into the best practices for organic management of fire blight. This project involves several OFGA members who will serve to guide the project as well as doing some basic research on fire blight. This project is funded through a grant which provides expanded hours for the coordinator as well as time for Leslie Howard and graduate students in her lab.

New tool for improved member tracking and communication - Also in December, OFGA got connected to Network for Good, a Customer Relationship Management software (CRM) and data management

service. This service will make OFGA more efficient at tracking information about members, providing targeted communications, and managing payments. Currently Chris and OFGA board members are getting trained in on how to use the service.

OFGA Board training - OFGA board members have participated in 9 hours of training on Fundamentals of Nonprofit Board Governance offered by Propel Nonprofits. Already we are making steps to strengthen OFGA's board and clarify roles between board and the coordinator.

Look for a report from OFGA's Board about progress on our 3-year priorities in the next issue of Just Picked.



Take the Survey! Organic Management of Fireblight.

Organic apple and pear growers, if you have not already, please take OFGA's internet fireblight survey. It's only five minutes long! Your survey response will help OFGA and UW-Madison researchers understand how damaging fireblight is, how growers control it, and what are the needs for future research. Thank you! [Click here to take the survey.](#)



Labor Management Resources

Whether it's part-time help during a busy harvesting and marketing season or year-round employees, most commercial fruit farms need to hire and manage labor. Here are some helpful resources on farm labor:

[Becoming the Employer of Choice](#). Hosted by the Fairshare CSA Coalition in Madison, WI, this training is aimed at diversified vegetable farmers, but local organic fruit growers are welcome. This is a nine-part online series, with sessions [taught by farmers](#) on Strategic Leadership, Hiring, Onboarding and Training, Motivating the Workforce, Farm Culture, Review and Feedback, Managing Conflict, Intercultural Competence, and Becoming an Ethical H2A employer. Choose to attend one or more of these sessions. Although many of these winter's sessions are past, Fairshare plans to repeat the training next winter.

[University of Vermont Extension Farm Labor Dashboard](#). Online tools to help you assess your readiness to hire employees as well as to estimate labor costs and generate job descriptions and personnel manuals. Easy to use for busy farmers.

[Farm Commons](#). Extensive resources on the legal aspects of hiring farm employees, including subjects such as overtime pay, using volunteers, employee manuals, payroll and taxes. All specifically written with farmers in mind.

Upcoming Events

[Preparing a Site & Planting Trees webinar](#)

(Beginning Apple Grower Webinar series)

February 9th

This webinar will cover basic planting methods, using videos from an orchard planting at Ferguson's Apple Orchard in Lake City, MN. We will also discuss how to select a good site for an orchard and prepare it prior to planting.



[Fire Blight Webinar Series](#)

March 15, June 13, October 18

A webinar series to address new research on best management practices for fire blight control. Not exclusively aimed at organic growers, but the sessions do emphasize biological sprays as well as pruning and sanitation, techniques which are generally allowed in organic production. [Register here.](#) Upcoming sessions are:

- March 15, 2023 - Using biopesticides to help control fire blight. Dr. Ken Johnson, Oregon State University
- June 13, 2023 - Pruning and sanitation strategies to reduce fire blight. Dr. Tianna DuPont, Washington State University
- October 18, 2023 - Using weather and environmental conditions to optimize biologicals and biopesticides for bloom production. Dr. Sara Villani, North Carolina State University

[Ducks + Vineyard Field Day at Good Courage Farm](#)

July 6, Hutchinson, MN. Details to be announced



OFGA Winter Gathering

Date: February 23rd

Location: [4 Sisters Events](#), 133 4th Street South, La Crosse, WI 54601

Agenda

Noon to 1:15 PM: **[OPTIONAL]** Working lunch and OFGA Board meeting (open to all OFGA members)

1:30 - 4:00 PM - Results from recent grant-funded research projects at OFGA farms and discussion of how to obtain grant funding for on-farm research. *Presentations by Dan Sheild (Stone Creek Farms), Liz Griffith (Door Creek Orchard), Chris McGuire (Two Onion Farm), and others.*

4:00 - 5:00 PM. Growing berries organically. *Interactive discussion lead by Thaddeus McCamant (Manager, Forbidden Fruit Orchard, formerly Specialty Crop Management Instructor at Central Lakes College).*

5 - 7:30 PM. Cash bar social followed by dinner at 4 Sisters

Cost for OFGA Members: *No cost to attend for the first 25 OFGA Members who sign up! After the first 25 signups, cost is \$32 (including supper, but not lunch) or \$50 (including supper & lunch).*

Cost for Non-OFGA Members: \$55, including supper, but not lunch. *Consider joining OFGA Member for 2023 for \$50!*

Save the date! Enrollment opens soon.

Ducks + Grapes: Applied Learning in a Small-scale Minnesota Vineyard

Kerri Meyer, Good Courage Farm

This season, Good Courage Farm (Hutchinson, Minnesota, Zone 4b) was the research site for a SARE-funded Farmer-Rancher project, Ducks in an Upper Midwestern Vineyard: Managing Pests, Weeds and Grass while Improving Soil Fertility. I am an OFGA member and the principal investigator. The project spans two growing seasons ('22-'23) and proceedings will be shared through online content, a 2023 field day and conference presentations in 2024.



Here, we'll share the motivation behind this research and some of our practical learning with you, our kindred fruit growers:

We just finished our third season with ducks at Good Courage, having brought them onto our farm for the general purposes of insect management, improved fertility, and production of eggs and meat. Mostly they've been in the orchards and in the aisles adjacent to our berry fields. We also run chickens under our apple and pear trees for the purposes of pest and weed control, but we were concerned that their scratching habit might be more than the root zones of grapevines might tolerate. While living in northern California for six years, we'd seen many vineyards there with ducks directly under the vines for pest and weed control. Our 18-acre farmstead includes one acre of mixed table and wine grapes, planted by the former owners and OFGA members, Andy Cotter and Irene Genelin. The soil in that acre is quantifiably the poorest on the farm (which grapes will tolerate, to a degree, in comparison with other crops), and we're interested in improving fertility and structure. While we don't currently have issues with Japanese beetle or brown marmorated stink bug, we're in a county (McLeod) on high alert for the incursion of these and other non-native species that cause

damage to grapevines. If ducks work and we can gain some efficiency in using them under our grapes, perhaps we'll be ready for the arrival of new bugs in our grapes.

Ducks are a different game compared to chickens in an integrated perennial fruit system. They don't scratch, and their webbed feet tend to create a mucky mat of grass and tender weeds. They don't relocate organic mulches with the same enthusiasm as chickens. They do need a lot of water all the time, but our vineyard has above-ground irrigation supply lines that we used to water the ducks as well. Our hope is that every time we dump a pool full of murky, manure-filled water, we're fertigating the vineyard as we tend the ducks. We're testing the soil across the seasons to track improvements in organic matter. We're also monitoring the weed species and scouting for problem insects.



A primary motivation for us as organic farmers was to explore the value of ducks as a regenerative component in our vineyard management. A cost-benefit analysis is helpful, but probably won't quantify everything about the ecological impact of this type of animal integration. Our up-front costs included materials to make some draggable hoop coops, some equipment for hatching, feeding and watering the ducks, and some funds to acquire new birds for breeding. We're comparing the time it takes to mow and weed-whip our vineyard to the time it takes to tend the ducks and move them

through the vines. Now that it's January and -8F, we realize that a flaw in the project design is that we weren't planning to track the labor and feed for the winter. Let me tell you, these are significant concerns this year, and if we want to start the season with duck-boots on the ground, we have to winter birds over. Next year, we'll build out a coop on wheels that will serve both in summer and winter, but that won't affect the rising costs of feed or the hours I spend schlepping water to our flock this winter.

In the success column this year:

- We had a great hatch rate on our own cross-breed ducklings (which was a pivot we made when avian flu curtailed sales from breeders from whom we would have purchased more purebred Anconas and Swedish Blacks)
- The portable coop design, through iteration, is now pretty ideal to our circumstances
- Ducks are tractable and easier to rotate than chickens, we find.
- The electric netting and solar energizer we chose were perfect for our application. We're glad to recommend what we've found to be the perfect setup.
- Because we're in year three of drought here, it was great to have all that extra water on the research rows of the vineyard.
- We didn't have any occurrences of avian flu in any of our poultry or fowl.
- We have regular duck egg customers, and though the sale of eggs doesn't cover feed costs, it helps

- Our freezers are full of duck meat (we didn't sell meat this year due to limited labor available)

In the "learning experiences" column:

- Vines don't provide nighttime cover against aerial predators (owls), and ducks don't naturally put themselves to roost like chickens. We lost three nice hens to a nesting pair of great horned owls. Then we added hours of labor (across the season) rounding them up and putting them to bed every night. Ouf.
- We train our vines to a 6' high wire trellis, but there are still 3' wires where the prior farmers trained low cordons in years past. This low wire has to be removed next year so that moving the fence isn't ridiculously time consuming and doesn't require a bunch of mental geometry. That's labor we didn't anticipate.
- In not mowing the research rows, we discovered that our aisles are full of perennial weeds with very tough stems. Ducks are great at managing a nice clover/orchard grass mix. It also became clear that Canadian thistle can cause bumblefoot (a staph infection following injury) in ducks. We'll adjust our mowing practices this year, as it's clear that the ducks are not going to help our particular weed problems.

From our perspective, the most important success was related to food safety. We tested our fruit throughout the harvest, working with a Twin Cities laboratory that checked our grapes for E. coli, salmonella, and listeria. It's encouraging that every one of our pathogen tests came back at zero in both control and research rows. If this work can contribute to future conversations about NOP standards regarding manure withdrawal (a 90-day period, which pretty much precludes any significant use of poultry/fowl in perennial production here in Minnesota), we'll be satisfied with our efforts. We're small enough to be exempt from FSMA inspection; we're USDA-certified organic, however, and our desire to integrate livestock is in conflict with our organic certification. If we can demonstrate that it's possible, from a safety standpoint, to have animals under vines through the season and with a shorter withdrawal period, perhaps in the future other growers can figure out their own cost-benefit threshold for experimenting with ducks in their northern vineyard.

Mark your calendars if you're interested in learning more at our July 6 Field Day here in Hutchinson, MN.

If you have questions or suggestions about this research, please feel free to reach out via email: kerri@goodcourage.farm. Otherwise, watch this and other channels for details about our 2023 field days and upcoming video presentations. Happy New Year from all of us, ducks included, at Good Courage Farm!