



JUST PICKED

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From the Coordinator's Desk

Happy Spring, Fruit Growers!

It's nice to take a break from tallying frost damage to reflect on recent lessons learned and look ahead to the growing season.

It seems like it's been a long time since we held our winter events! We had a great retreat at the Trempealeau Hotel in February, followed by some fruit-filled days at the MOSES Organic Farming Conference. Some photos below capture the action at OFGA's grafting workshop and scionwood exchange, while you can read about the discussion and decisions made at our annual meeting on the next page, and an article on page 7 details the conference workshop on organic grape production.

And we're gearing up for the next round! See the first listing on our events page for details on our summer field day, at Atoms to Apples and Two Onion Farm, both in southwest Wisconsin. Past issues of Just Picked feature articles by Rami Aburomia, on prepping his land for a new orchard, and Chris McGuire, on incorporating fruit into a successful veggie operation – both great reading from our two hosts. Later this fall, we'll travel all the way to Missouri, for a field day on value-added production at Blue Heron Orchard, with our board president, Dan Kelly. Stay tuned for details!

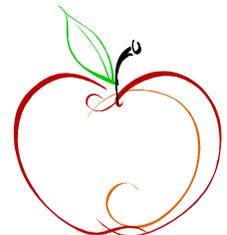


Left: Tree grafting demonstration with OFGA board member John Knisley
 Right: Scionwood exchange at the MOSES Organic Farming Conference
 Photos by Rachel Henderson

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Keep up with events and other news at our website organicfruitgrowers.org!



Have a newsletter story or idea to share?

Email
 Rachel Henderson
 OFGA Coordinator at
info@organicfruitgrowers.org

Welcome New Board Member, Membership Meeting Recap

By Rachel Henderson, OFGA Coordinator

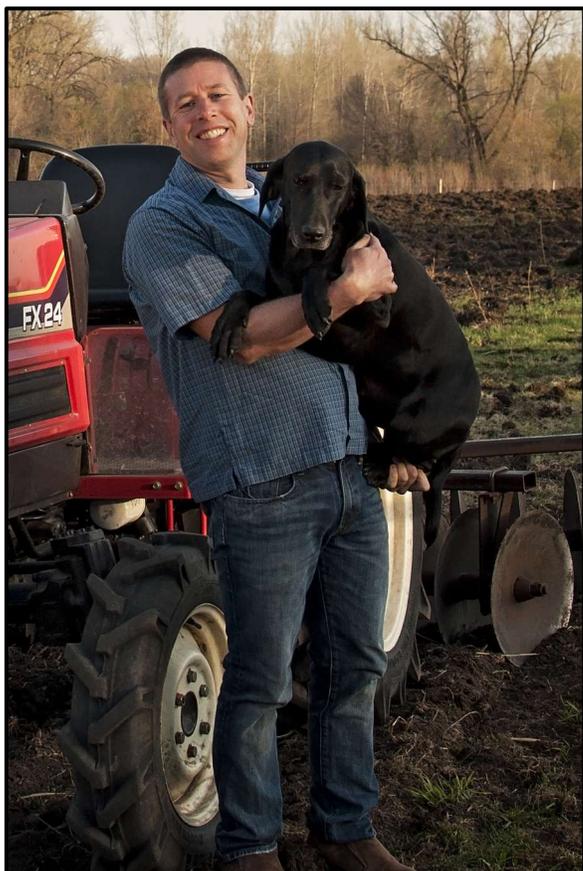
The Organic Fruit Growers Association held our annual membership meeting on February 26th at the Root Note in LaCrosse, WI. The complete minutes from this meeting can be read on the About OFGA page of our website <http://organicfruitgrowers.org/?110240000000>. This year, two of our board members were up for re-election. Anton Ptak, of Mary Dirty Face Farm in Menomonie, WI was re-elected unanimously. Dr. Matt Grieshop, of Michigan State University, decided not to continue on the board. Our thanks to Dr. Grieshop for his term of service to the board, and his continued commitment to research in emerging pests and innovations in orchard management. OFGA member Andy Cotter was nominated for the open position, and voted in unanimously.

Andy Cotter is part of York Farm which produces organically grown fruits in Hutchinson, Minnesota. Their main crops are strawberries, table grapes, pears, and apples. The farm has been in the family since 1971 and they have been actively growing fruit since 2009. Besides Andy, York Farm is cared for by Irene Genelin and their 18 month old daughter, Ani Cotter.

Aside from board elections, members in attendance at the meeting discussed the organization's commitment to advocacy on issues pertaining to organic fruit growing, and ways that we could be more active in policy work in the future. A policy committee was formed, and has started looking at ways that OFGA can connect to other efforts. See an article from member Joyce Ford in this newsletter.

A membership committee was also formed at the meeting, and has been working to assess our current membership level, how membership has changed since our beginnings, and ways to expand membership and improve OFGA's reach among organic and aspiring organic growers.

Any member of the Organic Fruit Growers Association is welcome to join these committees. If you're interested in getting connected or learning more, contact the OFGA coordinator at info@organicfruitgrowers.org.



We had a short discussion about improvements needed to our website, and a decision was made to start work on a new website, favoring a mobile-friendly format and easier editing. Watch for this new website to go live during the summer!



Left: New Board Member Andy Cotter, on York Farm, photo by Irene Genelin
Above: Hogs prepping ground on York Farm, photo by Andy Cotter

2016 Value-Added Producer Grant Applications due July 1!

By Deirdre Birmingham, The Cider Farm, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute Grants Advisor

The USDA **Value-Added Producer Grant** (VAPG) Program announced that \$44M is available this year, the largest funding pot ever released. This also means the next two years will have significantly less funding. This is a great opportunity that organic farmers ought to consider. Applications must be postmarked by July 1.

This is a great opportunity to plan a value-added business or to help fund early stage working capital expenses. Grants of up to \$75,000 for business planning and up to \$250,000 for working capital are available. A 50% match from the applicant is required and some of that can be in-kind (a match in the form of personnel time, services, or goods).

“Value-added” is defined quite generously by the USDA. There are five ways to add value in the VAPG. One does not have to process their product to have it considered as ‘value-added’, although that is certainly one of the options. The means of production, such as **organically grown, is considered value-added**, since such products get higher prices in the marketplace. Similarly, marketing and branding one’s raw product as local is considered value-added. The physical segregation and identity preservation of a raw product, such as non-GMO corn also qualifies as value-added in the VAPG. Projects producing renewable energy from one’s own bio-based products can be considered value-added.

The application is long and detailed, requiring much thought, information, and thorough explanations. So please, **start now** at <http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/value-added-producer-grants> to find out if it can help you achieve your business goals. Contact your state’s USDA Rural Development to find out if you and your farm business meet eligibility requirements using the link above.

Growers as welcome to use free Grants Advising made available through the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. Contact Grants Advisor Deirdre Birmingham at deirdreb4@gmail.com or 608-219-4279. Deirdre is an organic apple grower and long-time OFGA member using a VAPG Working Capital grant herself.

Note: You are welcome to join Deirdre’s **email list of funding program announcements** so that you know about funding opportunities ASAP!



Images of Spring

Honeybee visiting apple blossoms.
Photo by Chris McGuire, Two Onion Farm

National Organic Farmers Group Being Formed

By Joyce Ford, Blue Fruit Farm

Excerpts from the National Organic Farmers' Alliance 2015-2016 Organization and Farmer Survey Analysis

National policies, issues and institutions affect organic farmers, yet we lack a strong organized national presence to ensure that the certified organic farmers' viewpoint, needs and concerns are represented distinctly and directly, in the national arena. The National Organic Coalition (NOC) does important policy work on behalf of the organic movement, but it is not focused solely on the needs of organic farmers as it sets policy positions based on consensus for its diverse membership that represents farmers, consumers, environmentalists, and businesses.

Several organic farming organizations have been discussing the need to build a more effective and clear voice for certified organic farmers. For the last two years, a cross-section of organizational representatives from the East, Midwest, Northwest, South, Upper Great Plains and mountain regions, representing approximately 1/3 of organic farmers nationwide have been holding exploratory meetings and conducting surveys with other such organizations from across the US. This work is indicating a strong interest in forming a national alliance, network, or consortium of organic farmers and ranchers to fill the current void. Based on a recent survey conducted in spring 2015 of 43 organic and sustainable organizations, the majority of those organizations agreed that there is a need for a national organic farming voice. Starting in the fall of 2015 and continuing through March 15, 2016, organic farmers have been surveyed directly to gauge their interest and need for such a national organic farmer voice.

We know many certified organic farmers belong to organizations that are already engaged in valuable policy-focused coalitions, or are doing this work on their own. We do not want to duplicate or replace that work. We want to leverage this existing work to have a more coordinated, ongoing and timely national vehicle for the unique and specific concerns and needs of organic producers.

Consequently, the Organic Farmers' Alliance Coalition is currently forming a Steering Committee to develop the framework for an organic farmers alliance that will bring leadership to policy development and national representation that directly affects organic farmers.

This paper concludes with a summary of the key policy priorities identified in the National Organic Action Plan (NOAP), which was published in 2010 following three years of collaborative meetings and work sessions held throughout the US. Priorities identified by current survey respondents are compared with those contained in the NOAP.

The Survey Analysis was prepared for the Organic Farmers' Alliance Coalition by Kate Mendenhall, Renee Hunt, and Jim Riddle in March 2016.

To read the entire Survey Analysis, go to the events page of the OFGA website at <http://organicfruitgrowers.org/?110040> (link can be found below the upcoming field day announcement).

The Organic Fruit Growers Association, through our Advocacy Committee, will continue to stay in touch with the Organic Farmers Alliance Coalition as their work progresses.

The phrases "certified organic farmers" and "organic producers" include exempt organic farmers, according to committee discussions.

Mackerelberries? aka 'gooseberries'

By Anton Ptak, Mary Dirty Face Farm

I will start by acknowledging that this article will likely involve misstatements, errors, and general lack of understanding of botany, horticulture, and other agricultural endeavors – I blame my engineering background not really preparing me for life in the orchard. Why gooseberries, you ask – “they’re only a processing fruit, right?” NO! Of all the things we grow, this is one fruit where I really want to make it work even considering all of its challenges, as I think the potential could be great. I’m almost always greeted by pleasant surprises when sampling fresh ones at the farmers market - gooseberries can be really great fresh eating for the average Joe and Jane. They also make a good pie, but I prefer them as a sort of very early, more balanced, and perhaps hairy version of a grape.

As a little background, there are a couple major species at play here – *Ribes Hirtellum* (the American) and *Ribes Grossularia* (the European - apparently also a synonym to *Ribes Uva Crispa* - The Latin folks must have had a deadlocked jury when they decided on the name, so they went with both). I’ve read that the European gooseberry can be a true species, and most offered as American have at least a little European heritage. A lot of people tell me they have gooseberries in their woods, and they don’t taste that good. Neither does garbage, though, and that’s what those gooseberries are. They do look healthy, however. Cultivated varieties are much, much better, if no less spiny. There can be green ones, red ones, purple ones, red over green, pinkish, and even hairy ones (I like the hairy ones quite a bit). And as just a fun fact from Wikipedia, the French call these things “mackerel berries”, which makes “gooseberry” seem a little less odd.

Gooseberries are ripe in July, concurrent with other ribes, summer raspberries, tart cherries, and the like.

In the early days of planning our mixed fruit orchard, I remember reading that ribes (currants and gooseberries) were pest and disease free. Seemed a perfect match for an organically managed orchard. We found that (as I sure many of you all have for various other fruits) this just isn’t true for anything (except maybe the tannin fest that is aronia). Some of our gooseberries suffered significantly from anthracnose and leaf spot, so much so that they lost their leaves prior to harvest, leaving a bland harvest worthy only of the compost heap. This was especially the case with Pixwell, though the plants did bounce back and have not since suffered such a bad case of the ‘spots’. There is gooseberry fruit worm, which can cause a number of the berries to drop early, but for us doesn’t always get to a point where we need to worry too much about it. If I’ve got my wits about myself in June, I might spray bt a few weeks prior to starting harvest to keep these fellas in check. Then there were two rows of Colossal and Invicta, that just never thrived. After four years and still nursing 18” tall plants, we dug them up and threw them into the woods. Maybe I’ll find something surprising after putting them into their element. Or maybe they’ll have continued to suffer. I’ll make a note to make sure to check on them this year.



Pixwell Gooseberries (at varied stages of ripeness), center, adding color and interest to a July market table.

Photo by Rachel Henderson

Mackerelberries/Gooseberries *Continued...*

Grasshoppers! Once grasshoppers emerge during the first dry spell of summer, their favorite first food (at our place) is gooseberries. What do you do? Finally, their growth habit makes them a little tough to grow where quack grass is a problem. Growing in heavy mulch or dare I say plastic or fabric might even be warranted to keep the weeds down. On a lighter note, we haven't really had bird problems with these buggers (yet).

Thorns. Beards. And Tails.

What kind of berry has a beard and a tail? Well, the tail is really just a stem but 'tail' is a little more distinctive. The beard - I just leave it on. I'm too lazy to shave my own face let alone shaving all those berries. They don't taste like anything. But you know how some people are. They just need something to worry about. Gooseberries might not be for them.

Oh, and one more unanticipated challenge - I had always considered currants and gooseberries (or mackerel berries!) to be much more frost tolerant than apples, but I learned otherwise this year. They had already set fruit by the time we dipped to somewhere around 28-29 in mid-May. I didn't expect much damage, but probably lost around 1/3 of the crop. This was better than our plums in the same area, but I expected the small fruit to be somewhat hardier. I seem to remember the flowers making it through the frost in 2012 much better. Maybe the flowers are tougher than the fruit just after setting?

As for what I can recommend in regards to varieties, I've a few options thus far, which are by no means exhaustive. I'd actually like to hear from anyone else that has had success growing specific varieties - it would be great to add to this list. I always try to spend some more to get bigger plants if possible at planting time. Small plants can be set back significantly following planting if any one of the pests and diseases gets a little out of hand. Big plants can take it better and not be set back so much the following year.

Pixwell (a sort of half recommendation) - It has a reputation for tasting bland, but I find that if you pick a nice mix of greenish and purple berries, the balance is just right for a nice profile, and makes a nice juice, jam, and wine. They get a bit bland when allowed to be fully ripe, so getting a mix is the key. They haven't been the healthiest plants consistently, but this is one that really takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'. They are a bit trailing in habit, so they can get tied up in grass and be a little harder to harvest. They seem attractive to rodents, but as I mentioned, they came back quite well. I've harvested anywhere between 1/10 and over 1 gallon per mature plant, depending on the year.

Hinnomaki Red - another variety tending towards the horizontal habit. It seems to be less affected by leaf spot, which is nice. It is a little on the tart side, so perfect for that gooseberry pie. It does get really nice for fresh eating but for us it seems to want to drop a couple days before getting to that point, so we pick them a little tart and get them to market rather than losing them on the ground.

Black Velvet - as you may guess, this is a deep purple variety. It has amazing flavor and is a nice upright vigorous grower and not that affected by leaf diseases. So what's not to like? Thorns. All gooseberries are thorny even if the name leads you to think not, but this one takes the cake (by sheer incident of the friction induced by dragging its thorny canes alongside said cake). If you are overdue for that blood test for the doc, pick these for an hour or so then head in for that - the nurse will have many options for locations under your fingers for which to place the blood collection tube. I don't have any full size plants yet, but the ones we have seem to be getting there well and hopefully we'll have some decent numbers in the next couple of years.

I've got a couple others I'm hopeful for but will take a bit to get to size since they were poor spindly specimens when we planted them last spring. They are the USDA released 'Jeanne' and some alternative genealogy in 'Jahns Prairie'. Time will tell.

I hope you can find some time to make gooseberries a part of your life, as they are of mine.

Growing Grapes Organically

By Rachel Henderson, Mary Dirty Face Farm

When we started planning and planting our mixed-fruit orchard in 2009, we wanted to explore options for any kind of perennial fruit that would grow and produce in Western Wisconsin, zone 4. We faced a lot of challenges as a result of this decision, but one of the biggest obstacles to us continues to be the lack of resources and reliable information on anything but apples, particularly information for organic production. For that reason, I was excited that the MOSES Organic Farming Conference this year included a workshop on organic grapes.

Grapes are certainly one of our more marginal fruit crops, but when we have a successful year, they sell very easily at farmer's markets and co-ops, and of course with their intense flavor and high sugar content, they're also a joy to eat. With our half-acre, when we have production we can't meet demand, so they seem like a crop that's worth investing some time into managing. However, even when our vines get lucky with a mild winter, there are still a lot of ways that the crop can fail.

The University of Wisconsin – Madison has been conducting research on wine and seedless table grapes since 2007, including trial plantings. They have teamed up with other state universities on the Northern Grapes Project to work on and share more comprehensive research on cold-climate viticulture, cultivar evaluation, and marketing strategies for seedless table and wine grapes. Judith Reith-Rozelle, who has since left UW and works as an independent consultant, directed this research. While not specifically focused on organic management, much of the work on this project focuses on cultural practices for grape health, such as training systems for a cold climate, and the variety trials have identified not only cultivars that are cold-hardy producers, but also those that exhibit disease resistance. Reith-Rozelle presented along with Madeline Wimmer, a current graduate student in the department of horticulture, working on the grape research.

Pruning and Thinning

One thing that stuck with me strongly coming out of this workshop was the importance of managing crop load and canopy growth. Of course, we are doing that every year, with all of the fruit we grow, through pruning and thinning. Still, the temptation to get a little more fruit on the vines that are doing well is sometimes overpowering, at least for me. Particularly when we have winter damage on some varieties, or have only one or two vigorously growing cordons on a plant, it's hard to resist letting those vines hang on to a little too much fruit. This is especially true when we get busy with berries in June and July, and don't have as much time to focus on cluster-thinning, or removing the new shoots that never seem to stop.

However, it turns out that it matters more with grape management. Many of the cultivars we're growing are supposed to be hardy to about -20 or -25 degrees F – almost good enough. But the fruit load on the vines affects their hardiness. Too much fruit in the late summer and fall impacts the hardening off of the vines, making them more susceptible to cold snaps. We experienced this firsthand in 2013, after letting too much fruit hang on one of our best varieties – Swenson Red. After a particularly tough winter, we were set back for the last two seasons. Research at UW suggests using an even more aggressive approach to thinning less hardy varieties than is traditionally recommended. They additionally recommend leaf/shoot thinning in particular right after fruit set. Besides directing energy to fruit production, this also makes organic management of insects a little easier, as many grape pests are attracted to leafy canopies.

Growing Grapes Organically *Continued...*

Variety Trials

Cultivar recommendations was the other highlight of this workshop for me. I was personally a little disappointed that UW and the Northern Grapes Project chose to consider only seedless table varieties. We grow several seeded varieties and have had good success marketing them on our scale. For growers who are mostly selling direct to consumers and able to offer samples, seeded table grapes aren't necessarily out of the question, giving us a few more varieties to experiment with. With a sample size of one orchard, we've had good experience with Swenson Red, Swenson White, and Edelweiss.

Results from the Northern Grapes Project/UW Madison include these recommendations for the hardiest seedless grapes:

Reds: Reliance and Somerset (Canadice was close, but was lost at -29 F in Madison)

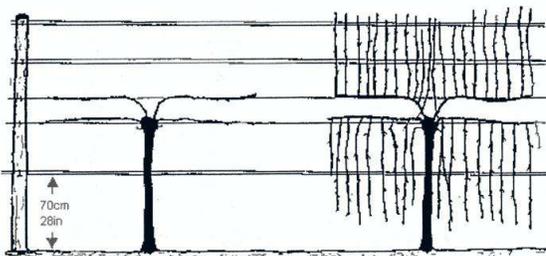
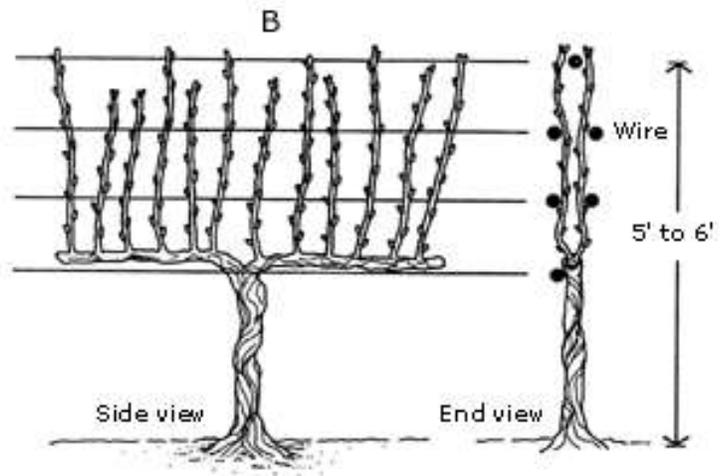
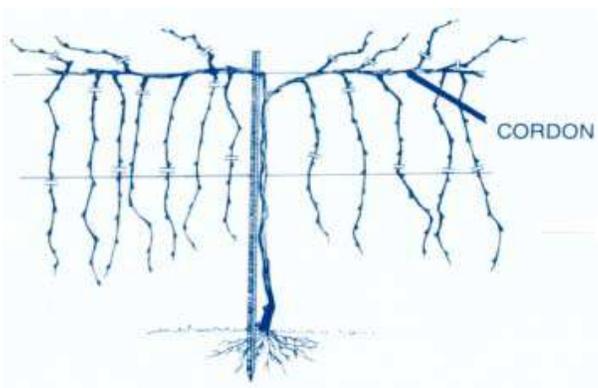
Blues: Mars, Trollhaugen (which showed superior disease resistance), Montreal Blue (ES6-4-47), and Venus.

White/Green: Himrod

For wine grapes, they recommend Brianna, NY76 (Aromelia), Foch, Marquette, Frontenac, and Petit Pearl for superior hardiness as well as disease resistance.

Training Systems

The UW researchers had also been looking at the impact different training systems have on yield and fruit quality for cold climate grapes – this research was particularly focused on wine varieties. Overall, the researchers favored cane-pruned systems in which the growing wood is replaced every year over spur-pruned cordon systems, where winter damage can result in unproductive areas on the vines. They recommend the Vertical Shoot Positioning system, in which new growth is trained up from a low wire, for cultivars in the *V. Vinifera* species, and the High Wire Cordon for *V. Riparia* and *V. Labrusca* varieties. However, they noted an exception for Marquette which seemed to fare better on a high wire cordon. They also experimented with the Scott Henry double canopy system, which seems suitable to high-vigor vines, and results in a larger crop. However, it requires much more labor, and may result in too much stress to the plant, so the presenters did not necessarily recommend it.



High Cordon, Vertical Shoot Positioning,, and Scott Henry training systems. Diagrams from University of Minnesota (above) and Iowa State University (left).

Growing Grapes *Continued...*

More to Learn

In discussing vineyard establishment and nutrient management, mulch was recommended as the best approach to weed control in an organic vineyard. At UW Madison, they used straw mulch for first year plantings, then added woodchips in subsequent years. However, Reith-Rozelle mentioned a publication from an Iowa State researcher, Paul Domoto, looking at potential for cover crops or “living mulch” as an alternative technique. It’s an interesting publication, and encouraging for those considering the option. It can be found at

http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1383&context=leopold_grantreports.

In looking for the article, I also came across a webinar of vineyard floor management, that looks at both cover crop and more conventional weed management techniques, from Cornell University:

<https://blogs.cornell.edu/nnygrapeupdate/2014/07/07/july-news-you-can-use-vineyard-floor-management/>

More information on the Northern Grapes Project, including their publications, details on research, updates from each year of the project, and biographies of the researchers involved, can be found at <http://northerngrapesproject.org/>. A recent newsletter available for download includes an article on costs of cold climate grape production.

I was also excited to learn about a new resource from UW Madison. They recently launched www.fruit.wisc.edu, a clearinghouse on fruit resources for the state – most of which is appropriate throughout the Midwest. The site is organized by fruit type, including tree fruit, grapes, cranberries, and berry crops, and is remarkably comprehensive. In addition to topical publications from Wisconsin and other institutions, they have a newsletter and event postings. They are currently conducting an online survey of 2016 frost damage to Wisconsin grapes.



Field Day Sneak Preview

Berry plantings at Atoms to Apples in Mount Horeb, WI

Photo by Rami Aburomia

See details on our summer field day at Atoms to Apples and Two Onion Farm on the next page...

Events!



Organic Fruit Growers Association

Summer Field Day – Two Approaches to Organic Orchard Management

Wednesday, June 15th, 9:00-4:30, Atoms to Apples, Mount Horeb, WI and Two Onion Farm, Belmont, WI

Cost: \$10 OFGA Members, \$20 Non-Members; cost includes lunch

Field day will include two sites - map/directions will be provided, travel is on your own

Questions or registration: email OFGA Coordinator Rachel Henderson info@organicfruitgrowers.org.

During this packed field day we'll tour two certified-organic orchards with different approaches to creating sustainable businesses. Both have planned and planted with an eye to organic management, and we'll look at how that impacted their decisions in layout, variety selection, and marketing, and the methods and tools they use in their fruit production. We'll also hear from Wisconsin researchers on current topics of interest to fruit growers.

Clover Valley Farms

Introduction to Integrated Pest Management

Thursday, June 16th, 2016, 5-8 pm, Zion Lutheran Church, Cloquet MN

To register email Cindy Hale info@clovervalleyfarms.com, \$25 fee payable at the workshop OR register online at The Apple Tree Guy's website!

Geared towards backyard and beginning growers of all skill levels, whether you have 1 backyard tree or a small orchard. This class will include an overview of issues related to growing healthy fruit trees and controlling pests and diseases throughout the season with emphasis on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and organic management of fruit trees. Classes will include lots of handouts on specific topics covered including the "annual cycle of orchards", meeting the culprits (recognizing specific diseases and pests), methods for monitoring and dealing with potential pests or diseases. Lots of discussion and hands-on activities, so bring your questions!

Land Stewardship Project

Farm Beginnings Field Days in 2016

- **Sunday, June 19, 1 p.m.-3 p.m.:** Harvest & Handling of Small Fruits & Berries, Mary Dirty Face Farm, Menomonie, Wis. Contact: Dori Eder, LSP, dori@landstewardshipproject.org; 612-578-4497

- **Sunday, June 26, 2 p.m.-4 p.m.,** Getting Started in Blueberry Production, Little Hill Blueberry Farm, Northfield, Minn. Contact: Dori Eder, LSP, dori@landstewardshipproject.org; 612-578-4497

Wisconsin Apple Growers Association

Summer Field Day

Tuesday, July 12th, Apple Holler Farm, Sturtevant, WI

For further details contact WAGA.

Events! *Continued...*

Minnesota Elderberry Cooperative

Spring Members Meeting, Elderberry Workshop, Farm Tour & Plant Sale

June 4, 2016 from 8am-5pm, free event.

River Hills Harvest Marketers, LLC and Berry Communications at Natura Farms

19060 Manning Trail N., Marine on St. Croix, MN 55047

Minnesota Elderberry Cooperative free workshop on growing elderberry and farm tour of some beautifully productive berry fields.

<http://berrycommunications.minnesota-elderberry.coop/elderberry-cultivation.html>

2016 Comprehensive Elderberry Workshop, Jefferson City, MO

June 17-18, 2016

Terry Durham & his Elderberry Team put on the original and most comprehensive workshop about growing elderberry. Keep an eye on riverhillsharvest.com for other events. It will include culture research (growing, pests, propagation), harvest and post-harvest handling, processing quality standards, and the finances. We always attend it, too. Early registration by May 1, 2015. Keep an eye of riverhillsharvest.com for updated registration information. Call Deni Phillips at 573-424-9693 with questions.

University of Wisconsin, Madison

West Madison Agricultural Research Station Vineyard Walk

Thursday, July 7th, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., WMARS, Madison, WI

Xerces Society

Planting Wildflowers to Support Pollinators In Michigan Blueberries – Pullman, MI

July 12th, 2016, 6:00 PM – 8:30 PM, Pullman, MI

Email emily.may@xerces.org for more information and to register

This evening workshop will cover the state of the 2016 Michigan blueberry season, major pollinators of Michigan blueberries, bee ecology and resource needs, how to successfully establish wildflower habitat for pollinators, cost-share options for pollinator habitat, and minimizing pesticide risk to pollinators. The event will be held at a wildflower planting south of Pullman, MI, managed by True Blue Farms. This event is free and open to the public.