



JUST PICKED

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 1

May 2014

From the Coordinator's desk . . .

What a winter! Cold, snow, cold, cold, and more cold. We had our three coldest months of the year in several years, and all back to back! Snow drifts did not melt to any extent between December and early March, rising to incredible depths that we haven't yet experienced in our time with our orchard. Our snowshoes got plenty of use this year as we tromped around in our orchard, ending the season dragging prunings piled on tarps out of the orchard and over to the chipper. On the plus side, the cooler days in March created a nice crust on the snow which eliminated our need for ladders as the extra two to three feet made the difference. Our deer fence shrunk as the snow piled up, but a little luck blew in with the cold – our electric fence seemed to do the job, and we did not appear to have suffered any damage. Well . . . maybe the cold did a little number on our few token peach trees, but in general, things look ok. The real indication, though, will come in the next few weeks as the trees begin to open their buds.

So enough already about the cold. Spring has sprung, and I assume we are all out now as often as possible getting done what needs to be done. Things are looking up. A cold ground will hopefully mean delayed bloom and a good crop for 2014.

Recap of Winter Events

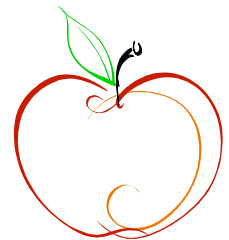
OTFA sponsored a number of events in and around the MOSES Organic Farming Conference, as usual. Of course, there was the almost-famous grafting workshop and scionwood exchange, which drew around 50 folks. OTFA sold about 225 rootstocks to eager grafting students and many folks walked away with cuttings of various fruits and scionwood to propagate in the coming months. I'd say it was a great success.

OTFA did things a little differently this year with regard to the annual meeting. We planned it outside of the conference proper, so as to allow non-conference attendees to participate. This year the annual meeting was held Thursday evening February 27th at the Pearl St Brewery, where a number of OTFA members and guests hashed out some action items for the coming months and later enjoyed some beers from the brewery along with various ciders and other beverages fermented by those in attendance – which is one tradition we try our darndest to maintain.

One of the main topics of discussion at the meeting was the scope of OTFA. A unanimous vote was taken to recommend that the board of directors expand the scope of the organization to also include other fruits like berries and grapes. It was evident that many of the members of the organization also grow other fruits in addition to tree fruits.

INSIDE This Issue :

| | |
|--|---|
| Winter Recap | 1 |
| “Life in the Soil” - A Report on an Elaine Ingham Workshop | 2 |
| Do Process: VAPGs | 4 |
| Organic Certification For Small Growers | 5 |
| NE IA Fruit Growers Report | 6 |
| Event Listings | 7 |
| OTFA Membership Form | 9 |



**Have a newsletter
story or idea to share?**

Email
Anton Ptak
OTFA Coordinator at
info@organictreefruit.org

Following the annual meeting and acting on the recommendation of the members present, the board drafted bylaw changes and sent the proposed changes to the membership for comment on April 2nd. The comment period ends on May 2nd. So if you are a member please respond now to the request for feedback on the list serve!

Again in 2014, OTFA sponsored a Winter Retreat for tree fruit growers. Attendance was up from last year - we had a full house of 21 participants. After some introductions and discussion around what topics to pursue during our open discussion time, we listened to a couple of very interesting presentations. The first one was given by Dan Kelly of Blue Heron Orchard, who discussed various aspects to the processing and value-added side of his business. David Sliwa of Meadow Farm followed with a presentation and dialogue on the philosophy of fertility management. You can read a little more on some of the topics that were discussed during David's presentation in the following article on the Elaine Ingham workshop he attended earlier last winter.

OTFA is currently in the process of planning our 2014 field days - keep on the lookout for details on those coming in the next several weeks, and if you didn't get a chance to way in on the subject at the annual meeting, let us know if you have anything you'd like to see at upcoming events.



Retreat participants enjoy a locally-sourced meal and in-depth conversation at the Driftless Cafe in Viroqua, WI

Life in the Soil

A Workshop Report

by David Sliwa, Meadow Farm

Elaine Ingham was introduced as a world renowned soil scientist with an ability to present her topic in an easily understood manner. Indeed, she lived up to this billing at the Minnesota Organic Conference held in St. Cloud on January 9, 2014. She is a Minnesota native who grew up in St. Paul. After graduating from St. Olaf College in Northfield, she pursued graduate study in Texas and Colorado. Much of her career has been as a professor in Oregon. Currently she is president of Soil Foodweb, Inc. Her work is world wide and some of the research projects discussed in her talk were in Australia, New Zealand and Africa.

The role of the soil food web on soil biology in all growing systems was presented very enthusiastically, even passionately by Elaine Ingham. I had the feeling she lives and breathes soil biology and loves it. She anecdotally quipped that after her two children endured growing up in a household where dinner conversation often revolved around bacteria, fungi, protozoa and nematodes; her children were now both in the entertainment industry.

Elaine Ingham's workshop title was "Life in the Soil." It ran from 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM with breaks. I am not sure Ms. Ingham herself took any breaks since I observed her engaged in conversations and fielding questions as I went and returned from my breaks. At forty five minutes after the scheduled end of the workshop I left to catch my ride home. At that point it seemed to me she would continue presenting as long as anyone remained. She clearly had much to share and was enjoying doing so.


One of the overarching principles of her talk for me was that if an agricultural system has healthy soil biology with the full soil food web involved, the ensuing biological activity will feed the crop and protect it from harm. We heard about root exudates, nutrient cycling, foliage analysis, aerobic compost, carbon nitrogen ratios, bacterial glue and fungal hyphae, and viewed awesome electron microscope images of roots and the players in the soil food web.

Many points Ms. Ingham made I continue to ponder and research to better understand. The following few are my take on what I heard.

- 1) No mineral nutrients are lacking in any soil. Unless we run out of sand, silt, and clay, minerals will be in the soil. The biology transforms the minerals to a soluble form available to the plant. No mineral fertilizer inputs are needed.
- 2) Standard soil tests do not report on soil biology. Soil tests may indicate low levels of certain minerals when in fact those minerals are abundant and are stored in bacteria and fungi. Millions of years of evolution have honed the ability of bacteria and fungi to grab minerals from the soil. Taking a soil sample near the root (where bacteria and fungi are feeding on root exudate, i.e. sugars, proteins and carbohydrates) and preparing the sample to be viewed under a light microscope will show the presence or absence of bacteria and fungi. A slide for viewing under a microscope is readily prepared by mixing a teaspoon of soil in three teaspoons of water and placing a drop of that mix on the slide. The relative abundance of bacteria and fungi will indicate the levels of the full spectrum of minerals present.
- 3) The soil food web can be destroyed by the application of insecticides, fungicides and herbicides and fertilizing; by compaction and by tillage. Some materials like sulfur and copper approved for use by present organic standards will also harm soil biology. Fortunately soil life can be restored by the use of aerobic compost and compost teas.
- 4) Rotation of crops is not necessary; a healthy soil food web will continue to make nutrients available; and will out compete, inhibit and/or consume pests and diseases.
- 5) As a market gardener and orchardist, I especially keyed into the concept that various plants require soil food webs with specific ratios of bacteria and fungi. My vegetables thrive in a soil dominated by bacteria whereas my fruit trees and other perennials will do best in a fungally dominated soil. Management of each growing system will be tailored to foster the needed dominance.

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Somewhat troubling were visuals Ingham presented of large expanses of monocultures (maybe onions) which were shown as examples of how well the crop grew where the soil biology was fully functioning. Such huge monocultures seemed incongruous with the spirit of working with the soil food web.

From the 1986 seminal paper on the necessary role of the soil food web in growing healthy and productive plants by Ingham et. al. (the senior author is Elaine Ingham's husband, she is the third author), a plethora of scientific papers have followed describing research affirming the positive role of healthy soil biology in agricultural systems. Elaine Ingham strongly urged growers, conventional and organic alike, to take a serious look at life in the soil and adopt practices which result in keeping the soil alive.



Do Process: Value-Added Producer Grants

Dan Kelly, Blue Heron Orchard

Applying for grants is quite a challenge. It is fortunate that the time to apply for a Value-Added Producer Grant or VAPG was during the winter months this year. This past winter was a good one to sit inside and look out on the winter landscape. The opportunity was to cross country ski. I however, dropped my heaviest pallet on my left big toe, just when the snow was perfect for the next three weeks. So working on a grant was about all I could muster.

So what is this VAPG? And how can you qualify to receive a grant award? Well, in the good ole American way, it is competitive. Meaning, your idea needs to be as good as the next person. But fear not, it is like going to an art museum. A lot of great art in different styles and yours can be in there too. And so in a nutshell, it is a grant to small to medium farmers and ranchers that have been creating products from on farm raw materials. In my situation, I grow apples, the raw material, and I make apple butter, along with half a dozen other apple based “value-added” products. I had already built an on-farm processing kitchen and have some equipment, all bought used. And I have the health department come by and check my water supply annually and later, my organic inspector does his thing.

This grant also presents an opportunity for groups of growers to market products collectively in a shared type operation. That can save money and expand your capacity while working together with others. “Branding” is a big word that goes a long way in a VAPG!

Why go through all that rigmarole of applying for a grant. Well, It's snowing. And you had good success in the past couple of years, selling a product you are excited about! People give you good feedback encouraging you and you believe you could expand your market. After all, you are a farmer, and like sex, size doesn't matter (at least that is what I have been told). What the grant can offer to you are items that allow you to expand your market base. For me those were jars, labels - including lay-out and design, and a marketing campaign . The grant helps cover half labor for processing and will help pay for up to 49% of the raw product needed, while the majority is my own. It also covers mileage for getting product to market. There are more possibilities that one could add to the list and depending on your operation, your list will be different.

Last year (2012- 2013), I applied for my first VAPG and what a difference a year makes! It was fairly easy and I was awarded the highest ranking in the state (Missouri), however, when my grant moved to Washington D.C. the independent reviewer gave me a low ranking. I was miffed. After seeing the reviewers' comments, I was convinced the person was not qualified to do this line of work. I appealed this decision and after printing off reams of documentation, was told my case was dismissed on a ‘technicality’.

In a conversation related to my case, I was told by the head of the appeals board in Missouri, who would have heard my case, that a looming problem in government is that not enough people are career oriented in agriculture and do not stay put in one agency for a long haul. One might like to see committed people staying on at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Free Grants Advising for Farmers and Rural Entrepreneurs

Thinking of applying to the Value-Added Producer Grant? A Rural Energy for America Program grant? To the NRCS for EQIP funding? Or just trying to understand the alphabet soup of funding programs?

If so, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute has a Grants Advisor that is available at no charge to help you.

If you are considering any funding program or just want to know what's out there, please get in touch with MFAI's Grants Advisor, Deirdre Birmingham, deirdreb4@gmail.com or 608-219-4279. She is also an OTFA member and can speak from direct experience.

Join her email list and get funding program announcements for Wisconsin as well as federal programs. Just let her know.

Also visit for grant resources and past funding announcements.

After this ordeal, I was surprised that when VAPG came up again, I read in the Federal Register, (where all this kind of stuff gets announced) that in order for a reviewer to be qualified, they need to have at least four years of agricultural experience. After my ordeal, I was asked to testify about my previous years' unsettling experience to a farming advocacy organization. In this case came change for the better.

What did I get out of applying in this current year? Like organic certification, I find that as I go through my farming practices during the growing season, I keep track of my operation. It becomes a tool that I create. For me, the VAPG became a business plan. I was amazed that by working through my project to expand my markets, my vision became more clear and the final document affirmed that in the three weeks my sequester became a crash course in marketing. And, as an aside, on this recent Earth Day I had to make an appearance in court. This fall I had a local company work on my apple storage refrigeration and they wound up destroying the compressor. I brought another company in to fix the problem at the tune of \$1,825.00. To make a long story shorter, instead of winding up in small claims court it got escalated to a court of record. I was advised by the judge to get a lawyer. I decided to represent myself. For part of my defense used as evidence, exhibit 12, a part of my VAPG to illustrate how much more money I could make from processed apples over raw apples. I'm hoping to hear the judge's decision next week.

Lastly but most importantly, I had been in contact with very good people that helped me craft the grant. In Missouri, Nathan Tutt from Rural Development in Columbia, Missouri is a great and patient resource. I hear people complain about government in our lives but all the people I have ever dealt in government, at least in agriculture, have been very helpful. Also, Deirdre Birmingham, the Grants Advisor for the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute dissected what I had laid out, made corrections, and asked for clarification of ideas. A true cyber mentor. She is available to help you, too. Check out the sidebar on "Grants Advising".

If you made it this far and you want to study what the criteria are for applying of a VAPG, check out the USDA Rural Development website. This will be from the recently closed cycle but it gives a sense of what I've tried to explain and encourage. Whether I get the grant or not, I'm still motivated by the experience.

http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_VAPG.html

Organic Certification for Small Growers

Joyce Ford, Blue Fruit Farm

(originally an email dialogue on the member listserv, edited for clarity)

Question:

We have been an organic orchard for 6 years. We were told that if our profits are under \$5000 we don't have to be registered to be called organic. Last year we attended 3 farmer's markets and are now getting close to that \$5000 mark, so we considered transitioning to organic, but wonder what your thoughts are, and what paperwork is required? Our orchard is only 1 acre and we don't plan to expand it.

Thank you. Darwin and Marilyn Theilman

Response:

Hi Marilyn. I have been an organic inspector in my past, so thought I could answer your question. Once you have over \$5000 organic sales (gross, not just net/ profit), you must be certified organic if you are using the word "organic" anywhere in your marketing, including brochures, website, and farmers market signs. We have a 5 acre orchard and have been certified since inception. If you are already using "organic", you should have already transitioned. You must be keeping all the records, use only approved products and management strategies, and be following the National Organic Program regulations as if you are "certified" organic. There should not have to be much change to your actual operation.

You will need to apply to an accredited certifying agent, such as Midwest Organic Services Association (MOSA - mosa@mosaorganic.org). They now have an online certification application and update system that I am using this year. For new operations, you have to provide information as to the last 36 months of field history - what is planted, what products were used. This is the complicated part. Once the history is established, a yearly update is needed which includes projected yield. We keep the following records: activity logs for all activities including pruning and weeding, pest management records including monitoring and actions taken and inputs used, harvest records that show date, fruit harvested and amounts. I would also keep a farmers market sales record that shows what I sold. A simple template can be made that shows what you brought and what you brought home, so it tracks the amount of fruit sold. This is also good business planning information.

The good news is that there is still a federal cost share certification program administered by your state (a simple form in MN) to help defray the costs of certification up to \$750 per operation. This was included in the last Farm Bill. My certification costs were a little over \$900 last year.

I appreciate organic certification to help ensure that I am following the NOP regulations. The people at MOSA are good folks and have always responded quickly when I needed approval for something. Of course, I knew the type of information they would need to provide that approval. That always helps.

Good luck. I can help with more information if you need. MOSES has a fact sheet on certification and a list of certified agents. There are other reputable certification agents as well (MCIA out of St Paul, MN for instance).

The MOSES fact sheet on organic certification for apple orchards can be found on OTFA's website, along with other resources!

Report of Northeast Iowa Fruit Growers Orchard Pruning day at Roger and Ruth Swanson's

March 22, 2014

Perry-O Sliwa, Meadow Farm

Plenty of the right tools, warm clothes, abundant food for a meal prepared by Ruth, an orchard of 80 year old trees and young trees, and fifteen folks looking for a pruning experience made a perfect time on this cold, windy, but very sunny March Saturday.

Most of us car pooled from Decorah to Swanson's Orchard, just west of Monona IA. Roger welcomed us in his heated garage with an introduction to his orchard. Some of the trees were 40 years old when he purchased it with retirement in mind, 40 years ago. Others had been planted in the intervening years. He lists the following:

apples- Rogers Best (Dudley), Liberty (disease free Mac), Jonafree (disease free Jonathan), Famuse (snow), McIntosh, Fireside, Cortland, Paula Red, Laura Red, Jonagold, Rhode Island Green, Northwest Green, Wolf River, Jonathan, Harlson, Wealthy. The oldest trees were Lodi, Macintosh, and Wealthy.

Crab apples- Whitney, Hyslop, Dolgo

Pears- Bartlet, Asian, Luscious

Grapes-Concord and Fredonia

Plum- Stanley prune

Addressing height was a challenge, as many of the trees were more than 20 feet tall. We circled around trying to identify the single cut that would let the most light and air into the crown. This was chain saw work. We split up with more experienced pruners getting started and those who were learning, listening in on decisions as cuts were made. On younger trees Jeff looked for establishing scaffolds in a spiral up the trunk and eliminated branches that crossed others or that were too close.

Snow, sometimes knee high, sometimes supporting our weight, sometimes letting us down, made getting around parts of the orchard a challenge. But we persevered in pruning trees and piling prunings, learning as we went. At noon we all enjoyed relaxing at the table Ruth had set for us with sloppy Joes, many bean salad, home made pickle variety plate, and apple cobbler for dessert.

Dave Runyon is hoping to have a rental chipper some weekend soon to grind his own prunings. He'll let us know and we could return to Swanson's Orchard to grind the pruning piles, a job that will use many hands to move the prunings to the chipper. We intend that the pruning will continue next season in Swanson's Orchard as we learn from what we did this year and keep working to achieve productive trees of a workable size and shape.

Events!



The Land Connection/Central Illinois Sustainable Farming Network

Farmland Access Field Day on Saturday, May 10: Come learn about all aspects of farmland access from experts including a soil specialist, attorney, loan officer, and farm appraiser. Terra Brockman, of The Land Connection, will discuss the pros and cons of owning and leasing land, along with creative sustainable lease, rolling lease, and long-term lease options. Community experts will be on hand to discuss legal and financial aspects of farmland access (zoning concerns including flood plain issues, when to use an attorney, farm financing costs, establishing a working relationship with a bank loan officer, etc.), plus how to access and use soil maps and platte maps, and the questions you should ask when considering a farm to rent or own. Come get all your farmland questions answered!

The event will be held at Homestead Harvests, LLC, 14861 Enterprise Road, Heyworth, IL 61745 from 3:00-5:30 pm. Click here for map. To register, visit the Extension website at <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/lms>. For more information, contact Magdalena at The Land Connection at Magdalena@thelandconnection.org or 217-840-2128.

Northeast Iowa Fruit Growers

May 13 5:30 potluck. Visit Seed Savers Orchards 3094 North Winn Road, Decorah IA 52101 (563-382-5990) Host Dan Bussey Tour old and new orchards, observe pruning and grafting techniques, see bloom

June 10:30 potluck. Sue and Dave Runyon's Riverglen Farm. (601 Big Rock Road, Fayette IA 52141 (563-419-1660) Tour established orchard, evaluate different root stocks (why do some varieties do better on this site than others?), enjoy a night on the Volga river with Horse drawn wagon ride.

July 15 potluck. Darin and Arelene Enderton, Apples on the Avenue Orchard, Nashua IA (641-210-5506) Restored 4 - 5 acre Orchard, 24 varieties, 250 trees.

Cindy Hale/Clover Valley Farms

Introduction to Apple Orchard and Integrated Pest Management on Saturday, May 17th, 9am-3pm: This full-day workshop is geared towards backyard and beginning growers of all skill levels, whether you have 1 backyard tree or a small orchard. The class will provide an overview of issues related to growing healthy trees & fruit and controlling pests and diseases throughout the season. Classes will include handouts on specific topics covered, beginning with an introduction to apple trees and varieties, followed by an introduction to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and organic management of fruit trees. You will be introduced to the “annual cycle of orchards” including methods for monitoring and dealing with potential pests or diseases, covering issues related to older trees as well as newly planted trees. Lots of discussion and hands-on activities, so bring your questions!

Instructor: Cindy Hale of Clover Valley Farms www.clovervalleyfarms.com, is a well-known local orchardist, farmer, researcher and advocate for restoration and planting of orchards featuring heritage varieties of historical importance to our region. Formerly with the University of Minnesota Duluth 's Natural Resources Research Institute and Sustainable Agriculture Project she now dedicates much of her time to framing and providing public education workshops and consulting related to pruning, grafting, orchard management, integrated pest management (IPM) for backyard to beginning apple growers.

Location: Zion Lutheran Church, 1000 Washington Ave, Cloquet. Class Fee: \$40 per session (bring bag lunch)

Questions or to register for classes contact Cindy Hale @ Clover Valley Farms, 6534 Homestead Road, Duluth MN 55804 Email: cindy@clovervalleyfarms.com, phone: 218-525-0094

Minnesota Elderberry Co-op, Berry Communications, Natural Kick Farms, and Natura Farm

ELDERBERRY OPEN HOUSE on Saturday, May 31, 1:00-4:30 PM: Natura Farms, 19060 Manning Trail N., Marine on St. Croix, MN 55047. Phone Paul Otten at 651-308-3801 with questions or to RSVP. The event is FREE, however advance registration is strongly encouraged.

Hilltop Community Farm, La Valle WI

Currant Events Festival Saturday, July 12 10 am – 2 pm. Celebrate fruit, enjoy live music, and explore ways to expand your palette for unique small fruits in Wisconsin. Learn about sustainable fruit production at Hilltop, sample ways to use, prepare, grow, and market small fruits such as currants, saskatoons, honeyberry, and elderberry. Highlights include: an orchard tour, tastings and tips for using currants and other local fruits from area chefs, a pie contest, live music, and the opportunity to weave and stitch food stories with area artists. You will leave the day with resources on growing these fruits, ideas for use/preparation, and ways you can help grow Wisconsin's local food/fruit system. Dress for spending time outdoors, rain or shine.

Suggested Contribution \$25 - Includes catered lunch, fruit tastings, resources. RSVP to Farmers Erin & Rob at e.schneider.hilltopfarm@gmail.com



Until the apples again appear on the branches . . .

What we do...

EDUCATION

As an OTFA member, you will have the opportunity to learn from experienced tree fruit growers and agricultural professionals, access current research, find and share resources, and network with other growers through:

Seminars: Intensive full-day courses provide in-depth information on wide range of production and management issues

Field Days: See for yourself how successful orchards throughout the region utilize organic management and engage in on-farm research.

Just Picked - our quarterly newsletter features grower profiles, field reports, event listings, latest research and production-oriented information.

Fact Sheets: Comprehensive concise information on organic production, management and certification issues.

OTFA on the Web: We manage a list-serve for our grower members as well as a general list-serve open to everyone. Members, orchardists, hobbyists, and those just beginning to explore tree fruit use our web resources to discuss topics related to production, marketing and policy. **Learn more on our website!** www.organictreefruit.org

Members receive discounted registration for OTFA sponsored events.



RESEARCH

OTFA helps facilitate connections and collaborations with scientific researchers to address the challenges of managing orchard diseases and pests organically in humid regions of the U.S. Our research initiatives focus on identifying and cataloging:

On-farm tree fruit research sites

Tree fruit research programs

Scientists interested in organic research

Specific projects that would benefit from collaborative, multi-state testing

Our members are at the cutting edge of solving disease and pest management in organic tree fruit production.



ADVOCACY

OTFA members have a professional organization capable of representing their interests in political discussions about the policies and programs that affect small growers such as:

National Organic Program (NOP)

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)

OTFA Membership Form

You don't need to be a grower to join. If you want to learn more about organic tree fruit issues or would simply like to support organic tree fruit growers, please join OTFA as an Active Non-Grower Member or as an Associate Member.

Active Grower and Active Non-Grower Memberships include full voting rights within the organization. Associate Membership does not include voting rights.

All Membership levels receive a \$10.00 discount at OTFA events.

- Active Grower Member = \$50.00 annual fee, plus \$1.00 per bearing acre
- Active Non-Grower Member = \$50.00 annual fee
- Associate Member = \$25.00 annual fee

Name _____

Farm Name _____

Street Address _____

City/Town _____

State _____, Zip _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Be sure to fill out grower information on the back of this form, & send with check to:

OTFA
c/o Anton Park
209 14th Ave NE
Minneapolis, MN 55413

Contact us at info@organictreefruit.org
www.organictreefruit.org

Thank you and welcome!