

the PRACTICAL FARMER

SUMMER 2025



In This Issue:
40 Years of Giving and Growing
Cover Crops Stories
A Tool for Preserving Farms







Ryan Herman's border collie, Ruby, considers whom to listen to: the call from her owner, or her desire to herd. Find out how Ryan is planning for the future of his grazing operation on page 24.

FEATURES

- 6 BEGINNING FARMERS**
A Tool for Preserving Farms
 Conservation easements can protect land while making it more affordable for the next generation.
- 8 HORTICULTURE**
Cover Crops Stories
 A trio of tales shows how horticulture farmers use cover crops in sometimes creative and surprising ways.
- 11 FIELD CROPS**
After the Flood
 Some farmers are choosing cover crops in the wake of more frequent extreme-weather events.
- 14 HABITAT**
If You Plant It, They Will Come
 A dose of inspiration mixed with valuable partnerships leads to a garden oasis for people and pollinators in urban Waterloo.
- 16 FIELD DAYS**
2025 Field Day Season Is Here
 If you're not already excited for the return of our full schedule of field days, this promo should motivate you.
- 18 PFI LEADERS**
40 Years of Giving and Growing
 PFI cofounder Dick Thompson said, "Diversity is probably the only solution in agriculture." This has proven to be a valuable guiding principle for PFI.
- 24 LIVESTOCK**
Be Like Water
 As he plans for the future of his farm, Ryan Herman is flowing with the currents of change to adapt his sheep grazing operation for the present moment.

DEPARTMENTS

- 5 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NOTE**
- 27 MEMBER BOOK REVIEW**
 "The Lives of Bees"
 by Thomas D. Seeley
 Reviewed by
 Kathy Bine
- 28 MEMBER PHOTOS**
- 30 PFI NEWS**
- 31 ON-FARM RESEARCH CORNER**
- 32 CALENDAR**
- 33 NEW MEMBERS**
- 34 THE FINAL WORD**
- 35 JOIN PFI**



ON THE COVER: Jordan Clasen shows a group of field day attendees how he and Whitney Clasen use a Jang seeder for radishes and onions at an early-season field day on their farm in Earlham, Iowa, on May 15. See other photos of early-season Spanish- and Swahili-language field days on page 34.



WHAT WE DO

Practical Farmers of Iowa was founded in 1985 as an organization for farmers. We use farmer-led investigation and information sharing to help farmers practice an agriculture that benefits both the land and people.

OUR MISSION

Practical Farmers of Iowa's mission is equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.

OUR VISION

An Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

OUR VALUES

Welcoming everyone

Farmers leading the exchange of experience and knowledge

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration and community

Resilient farms now and for future generations

Stewardship of land and resources

THE PRACTICAL FARMER

The Practical Farmer is a quarterly magazine published as a benefit of membership in Practical Farmers of Iowa. Through engaging stories and photos, our aim is to share the knowledge and experiences of PFI farmers, build a strong and connected community of members and supporters and celebrate our collective efforts to build resilient farms and communities.

Back issues are available upon request. Unless otherwise noted, articles may be reprinted or adapted if credit is given. Clippings and notice are appreciated.



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The late Dick & Sharon Thompson

Boone, IA

Diversity Is Key to Resilience

In farming, diversity is key to resilience. Many PFI members work to create diverse farms to better manage the boons and busts that come with farming, from markets and weather to pest pressure and more. They openly share their efforts with others to spread a more resilient model across Iowa and the Midwest.

Diversity makes things more complicated and often comes with extra work, but it pays back in stability. It also inspires curiosity, as diverse experiences foster creativity and innovation. Here are two examples from the PFI archives:

- **Winter 2011 Issue of the Practical Farmer:** Eric and Ann Franzenburg of Pheasant Run Farm near Van Horn, Iowa, keep busy with several crops. At the time of the article, the Franzenburgs raised corn, soybeans, finish pigs, medicinal herbs, tomatoes, ginger, greens, flowers, blueberries and laying hens. They've since added enterprises, including their legendary Sunflower Experience. Their son Calvin now farms with them as well.

In the 2011, article Eric said: "In my mind, diversification is very important. You can have good years in some areas, maybe down years in others, but overall it averages out, and you tend to have a good year every year. I like to avoid the 'ups and downs' of business."



Ann, Eric and their dog, Buddy in the 2011 magazine article, standing in front of their corn boiler that heats their three adjoining greenhouses.

- **2020 Blog, "Paving the Way for Diversity":** Dan and Lorna Wilson, of Paullina, Iowa, farm multi-generationally with their children. For them, diversity is a key reason they have been able to bring the next generation back. Here is an excerpt from the blog:

The Wilsons . . . challenge farmers to work toward diversity. Lorna invokes an old adage to explain the philosophy: "Don't put all of your eggs in one basket. Having multiple enterprises and plans is key to being able to continue to farm, and to bring family members back." That's not to say it's easy. "There are days where your brain is tired from keeping it all afloat," Dan says, "but diversity works."

Funding-Stream Diversity

Having diverse funding sources for mission-based groups like Practical Farmers is also important. Putting too many eggs in one basket creates risk. We've successfully diversified our fundraising – currently we have about 75 active grants. Applying for and managing grants is a lot of work, but we do so to create a strong fiscal landscape.

Early this year, an entire class of funds – our federal funds that we have secured – were under review. Some were frozen as the granting agencies started a review of our projects to ensure they are in line with priorities of the administration. This affects about 25 awards, roughly 22% of our annual budget. At your request, we've grown in recent years. We've fueled this growth through multiple funding sources, including new federal programs aimed at increasing the vitality of our farms – and thus, our communities. We knew this funding would not always be available, and we were working to find replacement revenue streams for when the grants end.

However, we were not prepared to replace the funding before the grant completion dates. We did end up losing our largest federal grant, and some remain under review. Fortunately, due to extra donations from our supporters, and long-standing relationships with funders, we have been able to pivot funding sources. Our work to equip farmers to build resilient farms and communities continues.

With the federal funding landscape in question, we expect that many of you, our members, are doing the same as you look forward. You're cutting costs, pivoting marketing, adding diversity and more.

This adaptive work at the organizational level and at the farmgate isn't easy, but it's important. I don't know what the verdict will be on federal funding to PFI, our partners and farmers. But I do know we'll still be here, working together to farm, live and eat better in our Midwestern communities, where soils are rich, people support each other, and our landscapes are sources of natural wonder and joy.

Cheers to the effort, the complexity and the shared mission of building resilient farms and communities.

Sally Wooley

Learn More

- Revisit the Winter 2011 issue of the Practical Farmer at practicalfarmers.org/the-practical-farmer-winter-2011
- Read the 2020 blog post, "Paving the Way for Diversity," at practicalfarmers.org/paving-the-way-for-diversity

A Tool for Preserving Farms

Conservation easements can protect land while making it more affordable for the next generation.

By Martha McFarland

Iowa's cropland value is some of the highest in the nation – and the top-ranking state in the Midwest, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service. In practical terms, this means farmland in Iowa is expensive. For anyone who wants to start farming or grow their farm business, buying land is a daunting, if not impossible, prospect.

But there are ways retiring farmers and landowners can bring down the cost of land while protecting it for future generations. One option is a conservation easement, a voluntary legal agreement that permanently limits how the land is used. In this overview, learn what an easement is and how it can keep land more affordable for the next generation.

What's an Easement?

A conservation easement is a legal document that permanently protects land. It attaches to the property deed, meaning whoever buys the land will have to adhere to the protections placed on it. Easements are held by a land trust. Most land trusts are nonprofit organizations, though some are governmental or other third-party entities. These organizations help write the easement and ensure the land is protected in perpetuity according to the terms of the easement.

How Does an Easement Affect Future Owners?

Easement protections will vary depending on what the landowner chooses. They can restrict subdevelopment near cities. Or they can protect natural areas on a property, like timber, wetlands or prairie, while still permitting farming practices in existing fields. Easements can also preserve pasture for grazing, prevent land from being tilled or even require food production on the land. In most cases, these easements will still allow the new farm owners to build new structures like a barn or a second home.

How Do Easements Make Land More Affordable?

The easement removes the development potential for the property, ensuring that the land can only be sold for its agricultural value. This can reduce the future resale price of the property and make the land more affordable for future farmers.

For example: A farm near a town has woods and pasture that could be turned into crop ground. That section of land is valued at \$15,000 per acre based on the value of a potential timber sale and subdivision. The land is protected with an easement, restricting subdevelopment and felling of trees. Now those acres will be valued at \$10,000 per acre.

How Does This Benefit the Retiring Farmers?

Putting an easement in place does come with legal and organizational fees. But the financial benefits can outweigh those costs. The difference in the land's value after an easement is established is called "the value of the easement."

In the scenario above, the value of the easement would be \$5,000 per acre. That amount – the value of the easement – is considered a donation. Come tax season, the retiring farmer or landowner can claim an income tax credit for that donation on state and federal taxes. In Iowa, that state credit is 50% of the value of the easement up to \$100,000, spread out over 20 years. Federal tax credits don't have a cap on the 50%. (If you don't live in Iowa, check your state's tax laws for tax credits offered in your state.) Additionally, the Natural Resources Conservation Service has incentives that can also benefit farmers and landowners.

If you're a landowner wishing to sell your land, an easement can help reduce the price of land for the next generation while providing ways to support you in retirement. But putting land in an easement doesn't require a sale. You may choose to put an easement on your land without selling it. In that case, you'd continue to own the land and retain the ability to lease, sell or bequeath it.



PFI members Tom Wahl and Kathy Dice worked with the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust to place a conservation easement on their family farm in 2020, permanently protecting their 86 acres for perennial agriculture. Tom and Kathy run Red Fern Farm, a you-pick operation where visitors make an appointment to harvest many perennials, including chestnuts, heartnuts, hazelnuts and pawpaws. They also raise Katahdin hair sheep to maintain their groves.



Land Trusts Working in Iowa

Iowa has several land trusts operating in the state. Some have slightly different priorities – but each will work with the owner to come up with an easement that works for that farm. The following are a few that have worked with PFI.

American Farmland Trust seeks to protect agricultural land, keep farmers on the land and promote environmentally sound farming practices.

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and The Nature Conservancy are land trusts that focus on conserving natural resources and protecting wild areas while letting existing fields or pasture continue to be farmed. Sustainable Iowa Land Trust works similarly, while focusing on setting aside land for sustainable food production. Most recently, Whiterock Conservancy has created an innovative easement that protects soil health.

“These easements provide landowners with a powerful tool to protect their land for future generations while maintaining its agricultural use,” says Breanna Horsey, executive director of SILT. “By working together, we can ensure that Iowa’s rich farming heritage continues to thrive, benefiting our communities, economy and environment.”

For a comprehensive list of land trusts in Iowa and in other states, you can visit the Land Trust Alliance at landtrustalliance.org/land-trusts.

If you don’t live in Iowa, the Land Trust Alliance lets you search for land trusts in your area. ■

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**Learn More about the
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 Conservation Easement
 Program**
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 initiatives/acep-
 agricultural-conservation-
 easement-program

Tax Incentives in Iowa
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Cover Crops Stories

A trio of tales shows how horticulture farmers use cover crops in sometimes creative and surprising ways.

By Jacqueline Venner Senske

In any annual cropping system, cover crops provide a host of benefits. Their ability to curb weeds, halt erosion and improve soil health are some of their more well-known attributes. But for some horticulture farmers, the benefits of cover crops show up in special ways. The stories that follow reveal some of these surprising and creative cover crop applications.

Sunflower Sentries

Downy white puffs swirled through the air at Lutheran Services in Iowa's Global Greens Farm in West Des Moines, Iowa. But these were not welcome winter snowflakes. It was July, and these puffs were noxious. Near the property's edge, adjacent to neighboring homes, invasive Canada thistles had overtaken an unplanted area, grown tall and gone to seed, billowing silky fluff across the neighborhood. And the calls flooded in.

"The neighbors were complaining," says Jennie Erwin, farm manager for Global Greens.

So she dug into her cover crop toolbox for a solution. Buckwheat is usually near the top. It's easy to manage, grows fast, is good for pollinators and works well in small spaces. But Jennie didn't think "friendly, flexible" buckwheat, as she describes it, would be robust enough against the tenacious thistles.

She also relies on multispecies mixes for their various benefits – like a peas-and-oats combo in early spring. The peas put nitrogen, a key nutrient, back in the soil, while the oats outcompete many weed species. For rehabilitating soil over a longer time, including over winter, Jennie likes blending rye and hairy vetch. In this pairing, the rye brings the weed suppression, and the vetch boosts nitrogen.

But she didn't think either combo could successfully best the battalion of thistles that had taken hold. So she decided to try a new cover crop ally: sunflowers. Jennie doesn't recall exactly

where she heard about using sunflowers to suppress weeds. But the idea intrigued her. "I probably got the idea from some research report or another from PFI or ISU [Iowa State University]," Jennie says. "I just wondered what other plant options there were for controlling aggressive weeds."

The tall, sturdy sunflower sentries have done their job superbly. This year marks her third trialing sunflowers as a thistle deterrent – and the word she uses to describe their effect is *thorough*. Areas once crammed with Canada thistle now have zero where sunflowers successfully established. "When I got in the sunflowers to look, the understory was just a completely different array of species," Jennie says. "There are some low-growing weeds surviving the low light and allelopathy [chemical suppression] from the sunflowers, but nothing as noxious as thistles."

Yet Jennie recognizes that it'll take time to oust the hardy thistles. "The rhizomes are still in there," she says, referring to the thistles' underground root structures that can persist for five years or more. "I don't know how many years I'll have to keep it up. But so far, I feel like we're winning. I also know that neighbors like the sunflowers a lot better than the thistles."



Jennie Erwin

Cover Crop Bouquets

It's early spring, and hairy vetch blankets the flower fields at Barnswallow Flowers in Montezuma, Iowa, where Meredith Nunnikhoven grows and sells bouquets, tubers and bulbs. By June, the vetch will burst with purple and white flowers. While noted as a durable cover crop that nourishes the soil, the blooms are a boon to bees – and Meredith's floral bouquets.

Meredith likes to plant hairy vetch or its cousin, phacelia, in the fall after she's cleared her flower production beds. Both are staple cover crop species that overwinter, thrive in the cool spring and "are great nitrogen fixers," Meredith says. "And we use buckwheat in a summer rotation as well."

Floral bouquets are a signature product at Barnswallow Flowers, and when Meredith looks at her cover crops, she sees more than soil benefits. Cover crop greenery and flowers often show up in her bouquets. "White and pink

buckwheat flowers show up in our arrangements, along with hairy vetch, phacelia and cress," Meredith says. "Even rye and winter wheat have made it into bouquets."

Meredith's use of the beauty around her shows her creativity as a flower farmer. But stewarding the soil on her land is a role Meredith takes seriously. "In the past five years, we've had little rain, and cover crops helped us farm in a sustainable way," she says. "We just try to have the ground covered and growing something as much of the year as possible."



Meredith Nunnikhoven

(Continued on page 10 →)

"In the past five years, we've had little rain, and cover crops helped us farm in a sustainable way. We just try to have the ground covered and growing something as much of the year as possible."

- Meredith Nunnikhoven



Hairy vetch and phacelia in Meredith's field.



Peony and cereal rye bouquets.

Fences Buried by Time

Long ago, near Conesville, Iowa, a field scoured by sandy wind came to house three fences stacked one on top of the other. Jordan Lyon, of Buser's Produce, relates the tale that's now passed into local legend. Years back, he says, a young boy helped his father build the first fence to enclose the field for grazing cattle. But the soil around Conesville, which lies between the Cedar and Iowa rivers, is sandy and loose, and over time the wind blew the soil against the fence until the cattle could step right over it.

So the boy, now in high school, helped his father build a second fence right atop the first. The high schooler grew into a man and came to own the field. And the wind still blew. When the second fence was nearly covered, the man added a third to keep the cattle in. Eventually, the land sold and the cattle grazed no more. The fences were removed and the soil was respread. The man grew old and his story spread to others in town, the details fading into fable.

Jordan tells the story of the buried fences as a potent parable about the value of cover crops at Buser's Produce, where he grows up to 60 acres of melons with his farm partner, Rich Buser. The old man is now gone, but the wind still blows the sandy soil.

That's why Jordan plants a new kind of fence around his melon crops: a cereal rye cover crop. "It's like a mini

windbreak for our soil," he says. "Our topsoil isn't very good, and we want to keep what we have in the right spot."

In their windswept river valley, Jordan and Rich plant rye in the fall on as many acres as possible to anchor their soil through the winter.

Come spring, Jordan marks off 50-foot-wide sections where he discs the rye into the soil. He then lays irrigation lines, covers them with black plastic and plants melons into the plastic. But between each section, he leaves 7-foot-wide strips of rye to stand guard throughout the season – living fences to catch the soil and spin a new story about a more resilient farm.

Were it not for his farm's sandy soil, Jordan says he'd consider planting rye across the whole field. "The sandy soil makes irrigation necessary," he says, "and running the irrigation lines through the rye would be hard." But integrating rye as he and Rich have done still helps in many ways. The standing rye not only holds the soil in place but also protects the melon plants from wind damage, which could invite disease.

When worked into the soil, the rye also adds nutrients that help support plant health. "Healthy plants will fight off disease pretty well," Jordan says. "But when you've sucked everything out of that soil and don't put nutrients back, you end up with issues like disease." Drip irrigation helps here too by reducing the risk of disease from too much water on plant leaves, as overhead irrigation could cause.

But Jordan says cover crops play a key role at Buser's Produce. "I can't point to a single practice and say, 'That's worth 5 bushes.' But cover crops are an important tool for us. They protect our soil, and if we don't have soil, we're not farming anymore." ■



Jordan Lyon

"They [cover crops] protect our soil, and if we don't have soil, we're not farming anymore."

- Jordan Lyon



A rye border planted in the melon field to prevent wind erosion.

Online Extra



See a video of how the cereal rye guarding Jordan's melons holds the sandy soil in place on a typical windy day.

After the Flood

By Solveig Orngard

Some farmers are choosing cover crops in the wake of more frequent extreme-weather events.



Flood waters on Cody and Robert Geary's farm near Elk Point, South Dakota, took more than two weeks to recede and clean-up efforts lasted months beyond that. Photos provided by the Geary's.

For Robert and Cody Geary, June 2024 was one for the record books.

The father and son farm together near Elk Point, South Dakota, in a narrow strip of land less than 10 miles wide between the Missouri and Big Sioux rivers in the southeast corner of the state.

In their fields, already moist from a particularly wet spring, rainfall around the summer solstice that year was about normal. But Sioux Falls, 70 miles to the north, saw 6.49 inches of rainfall over two days, brought by a chain of intense thunderstorms. It was the highest two-day total ever recorded for the city.

Areas just south of Sioux Falls near where the Rock River flows into the Big Sioux recorded anywhere from 10 to 17 inches by the morning of June 22.

All that water was headed downriver toward the Gearys' farm.

Rising Waters

Farming in a river valley, Robert and Cody have seen their fair share of flooding. "Normally, from the time that Sioux Falls gets a big rain, we typically have a week to prepare and know what to expect," Cody says. But this series of intense storms was different. "This time, we only had two days." The Gearys run a diversified operation that includes corn, soybeans, rye, alfalfa and livestock. Their rye, planted the previous fall, was nearly ready to combine when the floods arrived. The corn and beans were just hitting their stride. In the flat, low-lying fields, they didn't stand a chance.

"When the flood hit our area, I had 200-pound calves at a farm nearby. When we pulled in at three in the morning to load them up, the water was a quarter-mile away. When we pulled out, it was about 2 feet deep, and that was in just 15 minutes," Cody recounts. Robert adds, "There was 3 feet of water over the dikes along the Sioux River and big draining ditches we've got. It was just a big wall like a tsunami."

(Continued on page 12 →)

"Normally, from the time that Sioux Falls gets a big rain, we typically have a week to prepare and know what to expect. This time, we only had two days." - Cody Geary

“Once the soil biology is ready to the degree that I want it to be, I think during those extreme weather conditions is when crops should thrive.” - Nick Sennert, on the value of cover crops

Like many others in the area, the Gearys’ crops were largely devastated. Of their 3,000 cropped acres, they harvested only 160 acres. They lost somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 hay and straw bales to 18 inches of water on the ground in their sheds. Despite struggling to find the help and financial support they so desperately needed, they still found time to help local nonprofits clean up their own storm damages.

Facing the Extreme

The late-June flooding set records across much of the Midwest. But weather events are nothing new to farmers. Farmers here have always had to contend with floods, droughts, hailstorms, tornados, blizzards, derechos – and more – as they work to make a living off the land. Risk management is just another part – albeit a crucial one – of a vocation so tied to nature’s cycles.

Data shows, however, that these intense weather events are happening more often than they once were. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship notes that 2024 was the most active severe-weather year yet for the state of Iowa, with a total of 939 reports of tornadoes, severe wind or severe hail. Likewise, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Centers for Environmental Information, the number of billion-dollar weather-related disasters in Iowa has been increasing. In the 1980s, NCEI reports, the state had an average of 0.8 of these

costly events per year. This increased to an average of three per year in the 2010s. Astoundingly, in 2024 alone, Iowa had seven disasters costing \$1 billion or more.

Nick Sennert, a farmer in northwest Iowa, has noticed those extremes. He farms with two friends, Neil Krummen and Jessob Steffen, growing corn, soybeans, oats, buckwheat and winter camelina. Together, they share equipment and focus on the regenerative practices of no-till, cover cropping, animal integration and extended rotations to reduce synthetic inputs and improve soil biology. For Nick, 2024 as a whole was a noteworthy year. “We started with the wettest season on record in the spring and finished with the driest August and September on record. It was really tough.”

Nick farms near Linn Grove, Iowa, about 85 miles east and slightly north of the Gearys. Though he didn’t experience river flooding from the same severe weather event as the Gearys, Nick still witnessed damage to others’ fields. His own fields became saturated throughout the unseasonably wet May and June, which led to good yields in some areas and drowned-out spots in others.

Amidst all the rain, Nick kept his rye cover crop growing even after soybeans were planted in between the rows. “The hope was that by delaying termination, it [the rye] was going to alleviate some of that excess moisture,” he says. The soybeans



In low-lying areas of a field, excess moisture can even kill a cover crop. Nick farms near Linn Grove, Iowa, and planted soybeans into standing rye in this field. But he had to replant in many areas due to drown-out. Photo provided by Nick Sennert.

did survive, and things looked promising for many farms as the rain helped the entire state climb out of its four-year drought by July 2024. But the period of relief was brief. By September, Buena Vista County, where Nick farms, was back to being listed as “abnormally dry.” Likely as a result, his soybeans died early.

Yet, he pushed onward. Into the powder-dry dirt, Nick planted a rye cover crop, convinced of the benefits. “The diversity of roots brings a tremendous amount of soil health,” he says. “And the root exudates excite different biology to work synergistically together.”

Though he didn’t see much growth in the fall, he says he will continue planting cover crops in spite of abnormal weather events. “I’m not there yet, but once the soil biology is ready to the degree that I want it to be, I think during those extreme weather conditions is when crops should thrive,” he says. Soils with extensive root matter and high biological activity show increased water-holding capacity in wet and dry seasons, as well as a greater ability to let water filter down rather than pool on the soil’s crust.

Keeping Bases (and Fields) Covered

Back in Elk Point, Cody and Robert also had to navigate how to move forward in the wake of the 2024 floods. It was a long road. The flood water took more than two weeks to recede from their fields. Cody says, “I bet we spent close to three months cleaning up all the logs and silt, household garbage and corn stalks that floated down. It was a mess.”

The flood, however, was the impetus they needed to plant cover crops for the first time. It’s something Cody had been considering since learning about agronomy and soil health in college. In August 2024, he and Robert planted the Hi-Fly Mix from Millborn Seeds, which includes radish, rapeseed, crimson clover and annual ryegrass. Each species offers specific benefits to soil health, from reducing compaction and fixing nitrogen to suppressing weeds.

“They [cover crops] get the microorganisms going and keep them alive more than a soybean crop would after a flood,” Cody says. “We wanted to help create a healthier soil and to not have soil erosion and blowing that you see in a lot of fields today.”

Cody and Robert also planted oats and rye in some fields through August and September. While oats aren’t winter-hardy and die with the first freeze, rye can withstand the winter’s cold. This makes rye a good option for farmers who want to get more growth come spring – though Cody worries that the particularly harsh winter South Dakota experienced may have inhibited that spring growth this year. But he knows cover crops are an investment. “It’s going to take more than one year to know how much cover crops are improving the soil.”



Corn emerging through terminated red clover in Nick’s field in the midst of an especially wet spring. Photo provided by Nick Sennert.

Nick also acknowledges the long-term outlook necessary for success with cover crops. “There’s a learning curve to integrating cover crops into the system,” he says. “That may include the wettest of the wet years or the driest of the dry – and sometimes, you may experience both in the same year.”

After several years of planting cover crops and gradually adding new regenerative practices on his farm, Nick offers some advice: “As you’re approaching cover crops, start on 5% of your acres. Have adequate expectations and be ready with a Plan A, B and C before seeding your cover crops and before terminating them.” Most importantly, he maintains his positive outlook, recognizing that often one must experience failures and obstacles to truly learn and improve.

As Robert and Cody put up a dike around their farm equipment and buildings for protection in case of a future flood, it’s clear that they, too, are focused on growth and preparedness in the aftermath of their disastrous flood.

Meanwhile, the cover crops rising out of their once-soaked fields are just another sign of their resilience – now and whenever they weather the next storm. ■

If You Plant It, They Will Come

A dose of inspiration mixed with valuable partnerships leads to a garden oasis for people and pollinators in urban Waterloo

By Vanya North



Kamyar Enshayan did not plan to start a community garden the day he met Christine Kemp, the director of Peoples Community Health Clinic in Spring 2016.

The clinic is a full-service provider for the low-income community in the Waterloo, Iowa, area. That day, he was there to pitch the idea of a new vegetable voucher program. Instead, he would stumble upon a way to bring vegetables directly to the community – no vouchers needed.

“Just minutes into our meeting, I glanced out her [the director’s] office window and saw a half-acre lawn,” Kamyar says. “I immediately asked her if she would like to see that made into a garden. That was it. No forethought or plan, but I knew it could be done.”

Christine liked the idea and the clinic broke ground on the new garden in 2019. Today, the space is a thriving hub of life, with 20 plant beds that serve as a critical source of free, fresh produce for clinic patients, hosts, volunteers and AmeriCorps members. Over the last three years, the clinic garden has also become a food source for beneficial insects, thanks to a cost-share program from Practical Farmers of Iowa and Xerces Society.

“It’s right in the middle of a neighborhood that really has no trees, just a lot of concrete and asphalt,” Kamyar says. “The garden itself adds greenery to the area, and I always knew I wanted to add more biodiversity to the garden and in turn, the neighborhood.”



An aerial photo of the Peoples Community Health Clinic garden in Waterloo, Iowa, in 2023. Photo provided by Kamyar Enshayan.

Building Habitat, One Plant at a Time

With a goal of adding to the natural habitat, Kamyar applied for PFI’s beneficial insects cost-share program in 2023. Xerces staff worked with him to build a habitat plan and native plant list. To prepare the site, Kamyar used a combination of light tillage followed by cover crops as an organic method.

In May 2024, hundreds of native perennial grasses, sedges and wildflowers were planted as live plugs. Xerces staff, local volunteers and students helped install the native habitat. Straw mulch was also applied after planting to help suppress weeds and provide moisture for the young native plugs in the first growing season.

Native wildflowers like Virginia mountain mint, yarrow and golden alexanders give beneficial insects like beetles, flies and wasps a pollen and

nectar source when prey may be absent. Native bunch grasses, meanwhile, are vital host plants for butterflies and moths and provide nesting and overwintering shelter for insects. It’s important for these insects to complete their entire life cycle and remain within the garden to fulfill their pollination and pest control services.

“It was incredible to witness squash bees visiting squash flowers during a PFI field day last July,” says Sarah Nizzi of the Xerces Society. “The weather was gloomy and rainy, but the

conditions weren't keeping the native bees away from their specialized food source. A true testament to "if you build it, they will come."

A Garden Oasis

It's now been a year since the cost-share project helped the Peoples Community Health Clinic's garden add pollinator habitat. Most of the plugs planted have survived. In 2024, the clinic held a field day at the garden in partnership with Practical Farmers and Xerces Society. Throughout the event, it was clear the new habitat was already paying off. Field day attendees saw a variety of beneficial insects, including monarch butterflies, bumblebees and a host of native bees.

Adding this vital habitat also supports the garden's success because of how important pollinators are to raising healthy

food. Many garden crops depend on butterflies, bees, wasps and other insects for pollination. Predatory insects, such as wasps, also act as natural pest control by preying on beetles, aphids and other insects that feed on and destroy crops.

Ultimately, pollinator habitat creates a more sustainable and productive farming environment, benefiting both the urban community and the broader ecosystem. Looking back, Kamyar reflects on how all the pieces fell into place since that spring day in 2016. A garden he hadn't planned on has become a cornerstone of the community.

Also available at the right time was the beneficial insects cost-share program. Without it – and Kamyar's inspired vision to convert lawn into a local-food and habitat hub – neither people nor pollinators would have found an oasis in the middle of the city. ■

"Conservation does not occur in a vacuum. It takes multiple partnerships and individuals willing to try something new for us to push the needle forward. Farms and community gardens are critical to this work. We value the interest, time, labor and passion of so many like, Kamyar, who see the importance of supporting pollinators and beneficial insects and take action to make a difference."

- Sarah Nizzi



Some examples of the pollinator habitat that's planted in the Peoples Community Health Clinic garden in Waterloo, Iowa. Beneficial insects are also crucial for pollinating food crops.



2025 PFI FIELD DAY SEASON



Feeling cooped up?



Spice things up with field day season!



While we let the sun do its work,



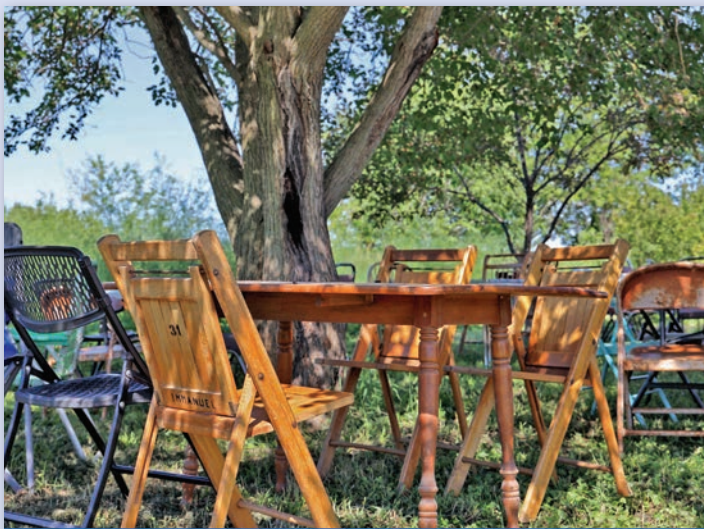
hoping for just the right amount of rain,



come take a closer look...



...and get into the mix.



You'll find a place at our table
(but it's a good idea to bring a chair!).



Because farming is more interesting (and enjoyable) when you share the journey.

JOIN US AT A FIELD DAY!

Field days remain a foundation of PFI's mission to equip farmers to build resilient farms and communities. We invite you to attend field days similar to your own production, or to explore topics and farms new to you. This summer, PFI members are hosting over 60 field days across 38 Iowa counties and five neighboring states.

All PFI field days are free for anyone to attend. RSVPs are appreciated, but show up anytime!

See the full line-up of field days, RSVP and learn more at practicalfarmers.org/field-days.

Want a PFI Field Day guide mailed to your house? Or a stack to share with others? Call us at (515) 232-5661 or email debra.boekholder@practicalfarmers.org.



40 Years of Giving and Growing

By Terri Mork Speirs

“Diversity is probably the only solution in agriculture.” – Dick Thompson, PFI cofounder



When PFI cofounder Dick Thompson concluded 40 years ago that “diversity is the only solution,” we know he was referring to farm sustainability. However, the need for diversity is also key to PFI’s fiscal health. To maintain viability as an organization, throughout the decades PFI has cultivated a broad base of financial support. Our supporters are a fertile blend of public and private sources including individuals, businesses, foundations, congregations, organizations and government entities.

Last year, the PFI community provided more than \$310,000 in funding (\$179,933 in membership income and \$130,877 in donation income) to further grow the mission of farm and community resilience. Thank you! We are extremely grateful for this demonstrated trust in PFI’s stewardship of monetary resources.

These unrestricted dollars are vital because they are flexible. The freedom to use this money how we need to lets us tend to program needs not covered by grants and contracts, such as technology, support for beginning farmers, on-farm research, field days and annual conference sessions, including the member favorite: Storytelling. Flexible income also enables PFI’s executive director to make critical decisions about PFI’s most urgent needs to meet the mission.

We are also extremely grateful for the \$14 million granted last year through public and additional private sources. These robust funding streams support equally robust staff work and end products that help farmers learn, connect and reach their goals, such as cost-share programs for cover crops and small grains.

PFI’s flexible income (memberships and donations) and our targeted income from grants and contracts together help farmers reach their goals while increasing profits. Thanks to PFI members and donors, we accomplished a lot in fiscal year 2024.

- Our programs helped farmers plant **839,484 acres of cover crops**
- We held **66 field days** attended by **2,725 people**
- Farmers completed **100 on-farm research trials**
- We helped **54 land seekers** find land that matches their farming needs
- We organized **75 annual conference sessions** led by farmers and other experts

Dick Thompson’s guidance to diversify has proven to be a valuable guiding principle for PFI – for both our agricultural landscapes and financial security. Thank you for your partnership, and for your collectively creative ways to sustain PFI’s financial resources.

Diane Horn: Care and Curiosity – Today, Tomorrow and Always

Gifted with a clear-thinking mind, Diane Horn first worked in the field of cancer research. Gifted also with a crisp-speaking voice, she transitioned into the business of broadcasting.

Blending her talents of inquiry and communication, she produced and hosted the “Sustainability Segment” of the weekly radio talk show “Mind Over Matters.” This half-hour-long show aired on a popular Seattle music station, KEXP-FM, for over 20 years. Diane interviewed hundreds of leaders on a variety of environmental, social and economic issues.

While life had taken Diane to Seattle, she was born and spent her early years in Iowa. Thus, one of her interviews felt more personal. On Jan. 4, 2010, Diane’s guest was Teresa Opheim, former executive director of PFI. The conversation about farmer-led initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture in the heartland of Diane’s youth sparked an alignment of deeply held values.

Plus, Diane had recently inherited her family farm that had been in the family for three generations. Diane decided to become an annual financial supporter. Ultimately, she chose to include Practical Farmers in her estate planning, including the gift of her farm.

During her tenure as a radio talk show host – delivering over 400 episodes of the “Sustainability Segment” – Diane gained a wealth of personal knowledge. Her interviews are available to all on the American Archive of Public Broadcasting (find them at americanarchive.org/special_collections/kexp-mind-over-matters).

“I was inspired by interviewing so many people who are working enthusiastically and creatively to make the world a better place,” Diane says. “Contributing to Practical Farmers of Iowa is a way to acknowledge my Iowa roots and my care for the planet.”

Diane approaches her partnership with Practical Farmers of Iowa with the same present and long-term focus she applied when producing her show. Her annual financial donations to PFI help create a broad base of undesignated income, critical to PFI’s program planning. Her estate plan is set to increase agricultural sustainability well into the future.



PFI donor Diane Horn lives in Seattle, but her connection to Iowa and sustainability runs deep. This photo of her near her home in Washington shows a view of Puget Sound and the iconic Space Needle.

One Mission, Multiple Methods, Infinite Gratitude

PFI supporters gave in many different ways last year, all adding up to abundance.

Each donation, great or small, is valued at PFI. Every gift joins together to grow PFI’s mission. Whether \$25 or \$25,000, by check or credit card, through gifts of grain or donor-advised fund – PFI supporters gave generously last year using multifaceted approaches. This tremendous generosity was critical in helping our network of farmers achieve their goals.

Donate by mail	Donate annually	Donate online	Donate monthly	Donate through donor-advised funds	Donate through Gifts of Grain	Donate in honor of or in memory of	Donate through Endow Iowa	Donate through estate planning

Flip the page to see three examples of why donors gave financially in fiscal year 2024, and their method of choice.

(Continued on page 20 →)



Larry Kallem - *Giving Annually*

Forty years ago, Practical Farmers cofounder Larry Kallem led the effort to create PFI's bylaws and set up the organization as a nonprofit. Today, he continues to grow the mission through an annual gift.

Larry says: "It is gratifying to see the continued growth of PFI's mission, one that we all care about so deeply. Even though I've been retired for 20 years, it is important to my wife and me to offer our cash donation on an annual basis so that PFI can plan for yearly programming.

"I believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts - in cooperatives and in financial contributions."

Sustained, annual gifts form a reliable financial base that PFI can count on to assist with budget projections and year-long planning. While some donors prefer to give their annual gift in one lump sum, others prefer to break up their annual gift into 12 smaller monthly gifts through an automated online setting that can be changed at any time by the donor.



Larry Kallem, PFI cofounder, chooses to support PFI with an annual gift.



Paul Hoffman - *Giving Gifts of Grain*

Paul Hoffman, organic farmer from Earlville, Illinois, chose to support PFI through a gift of grain in fiscal year 2024.

"I am a PFI lifetime member and a financial supporter because I believe in the work of welcoming everyone and creating a culture of mutual respect," Paul says. "As a young farmer raising a family, my financial resources are limited. But I would like to donate what funds I do have available. The gift of grain charitable donation process is one that works for our family."

Gifts of grain directly to Practical Farmers (rather than selling the grain and making a gift from the proceeds) may provide farm operators with more significant tax savings. Contributing grain allows farmers to avoid the sale of the commodity as income, while the production costs may still be deductible. Reducing taxable income may provide advantages such as minimizing or eliminating your self-employment tax and reducing your adjusted gross income.



Paul Hoffman is a lifetime member. In fiscal year 2024, he also gave a gift of grain to further support PFI's mission of resilience.



Tom and Irene Frantzen - *Giving in Tribute to Others*

Tom and Irene Frantzen chose to give last year by honoring their friend and role model, Vic Madsen. Respecting friends through gifts to PFI has been a meaningful tradition for Tom and Irene. Throughout the years, they have given in honor of many who have been a part of their lives for decades - friends who have inspired and mentored them, and served as role models. Many years, they've also given gifts in memory of PFI cofounders Dick and Sharon Thompson.

Irene says: "We've chosen to give to PFI in honor and memory of Dick and Sharon Thompson because if it weren't for them, none of us would be a part of this wonderful organization. Their inquisitive minds and determination to network with other farmers led them to organize PFI to start with.

"Little did they know at the time that it would evolve into the organization it is today. Honoring them annually is our way of remembering their friendship, their knowledge and leadership, their love of the land and its people, and the impact they made on our lives personally. We will forever hold them dear to our hearts. We have been blessed and very fortunate to be a part of the PFI family, thanks to Dick and Sharon."



Tom and Irene Frantzen find meaning in giving to PFI in honor of friends and in memory of those who have inspired them, including PFI cofounders Dick and Sharon Thompson.

Abundance and Gratitude

All gifts to PFI, for all the reasons they are given and all the ways they are offered, serve one mission: farm and community resilience. Thank you for the abundance of relationships and generosity given in fiscal year 2024.



Your Legacy, Your Values

To celebrate 40 years of Practical Farmers of Iowa, can we get 40 more estate gift intentions?

Including PFI in your estate planning is a bold way to ensure your values live far into the future. When you include Practical Farmers in your estate plan, your generosity will continue to raise PFI's mission of resilient farms and vibrant communities for generations to come.

Would you like more information about PFI's Legacy Society? Have you already included PFI in your will or estate planning? Do you intend to include PFI in your planning?

Please let us know! All you need to do is call or email **PFI's development director, Terri Speirs, at (515) 232-5661 or terri.speirs@practicalfarmers.org**. All inquiries are confidential.

PFI's Legacy Society

We extend a thank you to PFI's Legacy Society, those who have indicated their intentions to include a gift to PFI in their estate planning. This tremendous generosity is greatly appreciated.

Anonymous
Anonymous
Joan Fumetti
Helen Gunderson

Diane Horn
Larry and Ruth Neppi
Tom and Ruth* Neuberger
Rich Pirog

Ruth Rabinowitz
Ann Robinson
Jill Beebout and Sean Skeeahan

**deceased*

PFI received grant funding in fiscal year 2024 from the following sources

Federal Funding Sources

Environmental Protection Agency Gulf of Mexico Program
Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Specialty Crop Block Grant
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Conservation Partners Program
National Institute of Food and Agriculture - Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program Sustainable Agricultural Systems
Natural Resources Conservation Service Federal Conservation Innovation Grant
Natural Resources Conservation Service Iowa Conservation Innovation Grant
Natural Resources Conservation Service Regional Conservation Partnership Program
North Central Region - Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program
USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Farmers Market Promotion Program
USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Regional Food Systems Partnership
USDA Agriculture Risk Management Education Partnerships Competitive Grants Program
USDA Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Veteran Farmers

USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program
USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture - Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program
USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture- Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program Sustainable Agricultural Systems
USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (The 2501 Program)
USDA Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities
USDA Partnerships for Local Agriculture and Nutrition Transformation in Schools
USDA Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure
USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

State Funding Sources

Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship - Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality
Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship - Water Quality Initiative

Foundation Funding Sources

Builders Initiative
Cargill
Cedar Tree Foundation
Ceres Trust
Clif Bar
Farm Aid
Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research
Hearst Foundations
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
PepsiCo
Roger Ross Gipple
Sieja Family Foundation
Stranahan Foundation
Walmart Foundation
Walton Family Foundation
Ziff Foundation

Private Funding Sources

Apex Clean Energy
Archer Daniels Midland
Cargill
HSBC
Lifeline Foods
PepsiCo
Unilever
Walmart

(Continued on page 22 →)

Donations Above Membership in Fiscal Year 2024

\$25,000 and Above

Anonymous

\$15,000 - \$24,999

Anonymous

\$10,000 - \$14,999

Diane Horn

The Hope Foundation

\$5,000 - \$9,999

Fred and Charlotte Hubbell

Lisa Schulte-Moore and Peter

Moore

Mikol Sesker

\$1,000 - \$4,999

Albert Lea Seed House

Anonymous

Carol Bouska

Robert and Susan Fleming

Jan and Cornelia Flora

Charles Francis

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Joan Fumetti

Liz Garst

Sarah Garst

Helen Gunderson

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Kramer Foundation, Nancie Rosen

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Pecenka

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Linda Wegner

Mary and Glenn Wiedenhoeft

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Jerry DeWitt and Kathy Beery

Sean Dolan

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Brent Dresser

James Dyreby

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Phillip Ebert

Joe Eichelberger

Margo Eness

Kamyar Enshayan and Laura

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Richard Groux

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Robert and Ruth Harvey

Joan Hayden

Helene Hembreiker

Eric Henning

Tom Hertz

Sally and Charles Hillis

Clara and Harold Hoover

Heath and Katie Hoppes

Paul Hoppman

Shalese Huang

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Lee Tesdell

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Kislingbury
Lisa Schulte-Moore and Peter
Moore
Jacqueline Venner Senske
Lee Wollenhaupt
Carly and Ethan Zierke

Gift of Grain Donors

Paul Hoffman

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In memory of Anne Topp
Paul Ackley
In memory of Nancy Ackley
James and Susan Collins
In memory of Daniel Specht
Jim Dillavou
In memory of C. Clair Dillavou
Julie and Jeff Forgy
In memory of Donald Meyer
Richard Francisco
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William Gilbert
In memory of William H. Gilbert
Rabbi Jason and Ms. Devora
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Nolan Patterson
*In memory of Burton and Ronda
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Carl Varley
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Jonathan Andelson
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Kate Compton
In honor of Sally Worley
Tom and Irene Frantzen
In honor of Vic Madsen
Joan Hayden
In honor of Ed Krois

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Iowa Brewery Running Series
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Company*
Jim Moseley
In honor of Bill Richards
Barb Sexton
In honor of Keith Sexton
Kevin and Elsie Walsh
In honor of Rosmann Family



Be Like Water

As he plans for the future of his farm, Ryan Herman is flowing with the currents of change to adapt his sheep grazing operation for the present moment

By Amos Johnson

There is no straight line on the drive to Ryan Herman's farm. The roads curve through the fractal capillaries of the Driftless Region at the corners of Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The terrain lines of hills and waterways fold in and out of themselves in a kaleidoscope of redirections as the water meanders around boulders and limestone bluffs on its way to the Mississippi River.

Like the water flowing around their farm near New Albin, Iowa, the last five generations of Hermans have adapted and changed the direction of the farm as well; letting their course flow naturally through what the world demands, and personal desires seek out.

Ryan's great-grandfather preferred machines over farming, and milled floorboards from the pasture oaks, marketing them all the way in Chicago. Ryan's dad disliked dairying, so when all the local labor left for Vietnam during the war, he shifted to a beef herd. Ryan added a new bend to the farm's story when he first returned. He now finds himself in the midst of another meander reshaping the farm's flow.

"Ruby, come by," Ryan directs his border collie. Circumnavigating the glut of sheep milling about the dry lot, Ruby streams across the ground, perfecting her angle. The tension holds for a brief moment. Then, with a flicker of



Ryan looks out at the dry lot where the remaining sheep stay for the winter on his farm near New Albin, Iowa.

movement, she sends the sheep pouring past each other into the barn, where she corners them.

"Ruby done. Ruby. Ruby done," Ryan instructs, bringing her back to his side. But the dam holding back her energy can barely hold. She wants to work.

Ruby's presence, and Ryan's commands, become part of the rhythm of our conversation. Their to-and-fro frames the visit as we stand in the dry lot, watch the last 50 sheep that remain of Ryan's

once-sizeable flock and discuss the latest evolution to the farm. But Ruby takes dim interest in this chatter: Her eyes are on the sheep. If they start to spread, she's quick to herd them back into the corner of the barn, where she wants them.

Sheep are a newer development for Ryan, added to the farm in the last decade or so. Until recently, he grazed the sheep together with cattle – which he says was good for soil health. But Ryan found the life cycle and nutritional needs of sheep worked better on his farm. Plus, he appreciates the steadiness



Ryan's remaining cow keeps company with the sheep over winter.



Ruby regathers the meandering sheep.

in sheep value compared to the volatility of the cattle market. Because of these benefits, he switched to focusing on the sheep and custom-grazing cattle for others during summers only, instead of having cattle year-round. "I still remember the last semi of cattle going and taking a picture of the back of it," Ryan says. "But for me, custom-grazing in the summer sure works nice."

"Ruby, lie down."

Headwaters

She heeds, temporarily at bay. Managing sheep means managing a sheep dog – something Ryan didn't have to do growing up. When he was young, his dad ran the farm as a row crop and livestock confinement operation.

In college, Ryan started asking questions and wondering about different ways they could manage the land. His dad, seeing Ryan's interest, gave him Alan Savory's book "Holistic Management." Ryan describes delving in, his curiosity whetted, and coming away with more excitement and questions.

On Ryan's return to the farm, his dad was willing to work with him to shift the farm's focus. They transitioned all the ground into permanent pasture and changed to grass-finished beef. Ryan is grateful for his dad's flexibility, and aims to emulate it with his own children.

"At one point, [my dad] sat back and said, 'Okay, if that's what you want to do, that's what we'll do,'" recalls Ryan. "That's part of my philosophy with my own kids. There are always opportunities out there. You just have to find what fits best for you and your family."

"Ruby. Ruby come. Ruby."

Meanders

Ruby trots back to Ryan after another eager pass around the sheep, re-corralled tightly back into the corner of the barn. These sheep were once part of a much larger flock. But in fall 2024, Ryan sent the vast majority – 1,000 animals – to Texas to graze under a solar panel installation. This remnant flock, plus a docile cow, are all the livestock that now remain on the farm over winter since Ryan's shift to contract grazing.

These changes comprise the latest twist as Ryan looks downstream to when his kids return to the farm. While they're still in middle school, Ryan is preparing now – part of which means simply managing to keep going himself. Because of his training in Holistic Management decision-making, which considers social, financial and community aspects, he recognized the need for change. "Health-wise as I get older, it's physically pretty hard for me to get everything accomplished," he says.

Under a three-year contract, the day-to-day care of the sheep in Texas is handled by a manager responsible for thousands of sheep, plus a shepherd dedicated to Ryan's flock. Ryan gets updates every couple of weeks. In March, he and his daughter flew down to help with the spring work: inspection, sorting, worming, etc.

The chance for that close collaboration is partly why Ryan chose to work with this manager. "I can go down there for a few days and learn from him," Ryan says, "because he has just a ton of experience, and that's worth quite a bit." Ryan ultimately wants to graze solar installations closer to home. But it takes time to establish those connections and learn how to do it. This arrangement gives him both time and knowledge.

(Continued on page 26 →)



Ryan visited his sheep last March in Texas to see them under the solar panels.



Ryan works with Ruby to gather the flock on his farm in New Albin, Iowa.

But in the end, if his kids aren't into solar grazing, Ryan is open to wherever their passion lies. "My son likes machines more than I do," Ryan says. "If he would want to go back to cropping, I feel like I should be open-minded enough to let him do it and help him do it, even though I believe in perennial pasture. I think part of the reason why we've been able to keep this farm in the family for five or six generations is that the previous generation has been open-minded enough to, at some point, let the next generation take the reins and run."

"Ruby. Ruby come now."

Oxbows

Ryan moves back, hoping that a little distance might lessen Ruby's sheep fixation. It doesn't. Standing at the base of the old brick silo, Ryan stares down at her as he muses on the process of change. "In the end," he says, "change can be hard. It's painful. We're creatures of habit." The same seems true for Ruby also. "But that's something I'll say for this farm. Every generation has had to change, adapt, because agriculture is always evolving. I'm afraid if you don't, eventually you get a little bit trapped."

Holistic Management has helped Ryan navigate through the process. But he's also quick to underscore the importance of community. You have to talk with people, he says. "And not necessarily always like-minded people. Try to explain to them what you're doing and why you're doing it. That will really make you think sometimes, and you have to have a good answer."

Rivers flow around obstacles rather than through them. They bend and turn – sometimes doubling back – to keep moving forward. The straight line is not the goal. The river seeks only to continue on its journey.

"I'm just trying to think outside the box and look for opportunities," Ryan says as Ruby tenses next to him. Focused in on the flock, her brain runs a route before her, calculating and eager to return to her Sisyphean task of putting the sheep in perfect order. There's always a new approach to the problem.

"Ruby. Ruby done." ■

Review of Thomas D. Seeley's "The Lives of Bees"

Reviewed by Kathy Bine

North America has no native honeybee species. They were brought here by Europeans arriving in the 17th century – and now play a crucial role in American agriculture.

Despite their foreign origin, honeybees have persisted in a landscape that offers few of their familiar flowers. Their hives produce honey, wax, pollen, royal jelly and propolis – products humans have valued for centuries. Humans keep honeybees as livestock, yet honeybee colonies retain the ability to swarm, escape and live in the wild.

It's these feral colonies that have especially interested Thomas D. Seeley, author of "The Lives of Bees: The Untold Story of the Honey Bee in the Wild." He began observing wild honeybees in the 1960s as a kid in the Finger Lakes area near Ithaca, New York. Since then, he's become a world expert on these insects, which have lived with humans for millennia.

Thomas' message is this: To keep a colony of honeybees at its healthiest, the beekeeper should simulate the conditions of healthy feral colonies in the local area. Among those conditions, Thomas writes, are hive location and construction; diet; adaptation to disease and parasites (like the notorious varroa mite); and defenses against animals that would steal from the hive. One question he's sought to understand from years of observing both managed and feral colonies is how wild colonies succeed in making new generations of queens and drones, and ultimately, new colonies.

If you're open to ideas and short on time, consider starting with Chapter 11, "Darwinian Beekeeping." This chapter shares 14 practices, based on observations of feral honeybees, that may benefit managed colonies. A beekeeper might choose one or a few practices to explore further from the list, then test them using a small number

of hives. For example, Thomas advises beekeepers to provide hives with thicker walls so they're better insulated for temperature changes. Or offer hives rough interior walls, which could encourage bees to coat them with propolis – a resin-like material bees make to build hives that may also help fight against parasites.

Many of Thomas' recommendations seem straightforward for small-scale beekeepers to try. Without the pressure of fulfilling contracts, these operations have more flexibility to field-test the practices he suggests. Commercial beekeepers, however, who truck their hives long distances, would face challenges adopting some of this advice. For example, Thomas recommends getting queens that are local and have mated with drones through natural competition – but any "local advantage" is likely lost when hives are trucked from Florida to California.

Chapters 2 through 10 describe Thomas's detailed research on beekeeping practices and data collected from his observations. Readers will learn about the lives of wild bees, the nature of the colony and its annual cycle, reproduction, food collection, temperature control and colony defense. The book also looks at the history of beekeeping and includes references to published academic research.

Thomas points out that his observations in the Finger Lakes region may not apply as well to other locales. One key difference is that 37.1% of the land in New York is considered public land. Iowa, by contrast, has only 2% of its land in public land. New York is known for its

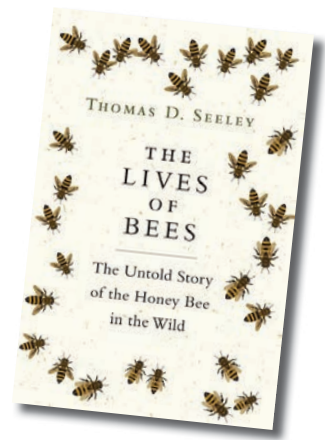
forests, which offer more hollow trees where a feral colony might establish.

Once you leave an Iowa river or creek, large trees with hollows for a beehive may be hard to find. But resourceful honeybees can take up residence in sheds, under porches and in houses – my grandmother had hives move into her attic nearly every June during the 1970s. Bears are less a hazard in the Midwest, though skunks and raccoons do raid hives.

Another challenge for honeybees in Iowa is that two crops, corn and soybeans, dominate the landscape; yet honeybees benefit from nectaring on a variety of plants, ideally those not treated with insecticides or fungicides. These widely used chemicals can drift onto road ditches, buffers – and even family tomato patches. The result is that the areas we might think are available for pollinator habitat are actually toxic to them.

If you're not ready to keep bees, you can still help them by planting bee-friendly flowering plants such as bee balm and lavender – or simply by not killing dandelions, a European import that honeybees visit. ■

Kathy Bine worked as a technical writer for 35 years, and volunteered for a decade as a docent in the Invertebrate Exhibit at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. She lives in Fairfax, Virginia, and owns family farmland north of Beaman in Grundy County, Iowa.



PFI MEMBER

Photo Album

This section features photos taken by PFI members. Whether you're a farmer, landowner or a non-farmer, we invite you to share your images of the everyday, the awe-inspiring or the curiously beautiful from your farm or community; we'll work to curate them into the album.



Highland cows enjoying some sorghum sudangrass on an August evening. (Matt Vermeersch, Resilient Farms, Red Oak, Iowa)



Mike Robertson farms the hay ground and garden with a team of draft horses – and the kids love to help. (Janine Robertson, Knob Hill Farm, Webster City, Iowa)



Mother ewe kindly lets her twins climb over her. (MaryAnn Mathis, Cory Family Farm, Elkhart, Iowa)



A close look at a summer cover crop including turnips, radishes, sunflowers and clover. (Ross McCaw, McCaw Custom Farms, Marengo, Iowa)



After Rosemary and Mike's greenhouse was built, volunteers from other farms helped pull the plastic and get it wired in. Community in action! (Rosemary Roelf, Singing Goat Farm, Iowa City, Iowa)



A colossal blueberry from Kim's farm. From the top: a 50-cent piece, Chandler blueberry and a quarter. (Kim Anderson, Blueberry Bottom Farm, Brighton, Iowa)



Audrey and Ellie Shinn with their favorite goats of the year. (Jacqueline Shinn, L4 Farms, Douds, Iowa)



A storm front moving through southwest Iowa on a June evening. (Matt Vermeersch, Resilient Farms, Red Oak, Iowa)



Have a photo you'd like featured in the magazine?

Email it to rachel.deutmeyer@practicalfarmers.org or tag PFI on social media and let us know!

Have You Seen PFI's Newest Videos?



PFI's videos highlight a range of farming topics members have told us they're interested in, and showcase the knowledge and innovations of PFI farmers.

Recent videos have explored how farmers are starting cover crop seed businesses; finding solutions for grazing livestock on cover crops; restoring native perennials – and bringing back native birds; planting on-farm habitat for beneficial insects; and more.

Some videos have also been released with Spanish subtitles so the content is more accessible to Spanish-speaking farmers. These include one on timing when to roller-crimp a rye cover crop and roller-crimping cereal rye in soybeans.

Explore all PFI's videos at practicalfarmers.org/video. To get notified when new videos are released, subscribed to our YouTube channel at youtube.com/@practicalfarmers. ■

Represent PFI On or Off the Farm

Now that field day season is here, show your support for PFI by wearing PFI-branded items at an upcoming event.

Our merchandise includes a range of hats, T-shirts and long-sleeved shirts and hoodies – as well as our signature short-sleeved “Don't Farm Naked” shirts. We also have youth T-shirts and onesies for the littlest PFI members.

Wearing PFI merchandise helps spread the word about our programming in communities far and wide.

Order online at engage.practicalfarmers.org/shop-pfi for delivery anywhere in the U.S., or find our merchandise at an upcoming PFI field day. ■



Shop Local (and PFI) With Our Local Foods Directory

Farmers market season is upon us. PFI fruit and veggie growers are selling a range of fresh fruits and vegetables, fragrant flowers, vibrant salad greens, eggs and meats, value-added products – and more – at their stands, in on-farm shops and at brick-and-mortar businesses.

Our Local Foods Directory, hosted by MarketMaker, can help you find and support a PFI grower near you. Visit practicalfarmers.org/local-foods-directory for more information.

And if you're a grower who's not yet in the directory, contact Emma Liddle at emma.liddle@practicalfarmers.org or call the office at (515) 232-5661 to get your farm business added. ■

Register for a Virtual Cover Crop Workshop on Aug. 5

New to cover crops or ready to take them to the next level? Register for PFI's Virtual Cover Crop Workshop, taking place Tuesday, Aug. 5, from 2–5 p.m.

The free, virtual event offers an afternoon of sessions for farmers of all cover cropping experience levels – whether they're seasoned practitioners or just starting out.

Attendees will hear how to:

- Get started with cover crops
- Graze cattle on cover crops
- Manage cover crops in drought and flood years
- Reduce inputs using cover crops

To register, visit practicalfarmers.org/virtual-cover-crop-workshop. ■

On-Farm Research Corner

Overwintering Greens

By Emma Link

In Iowa's northern winters, most crops die after the first hard freeze. But some crops – including certain varieties of greens – are cold-hardy and can survive these conditions, with the right care. This practice, called overwintering, produces an early-spring crop that is especially delicious. To keep from freezing, crops grown over winter increase the sugar concentration in their cells. This leads to a sweeter taste.

Since 2022, four farms involved with PFI's Cooperators' Program have done eight trials on overwintering greens for spring harvest. To overwinter greens, farmers plant them in the fall and usually add protection such as a low tunnel or straw as the weather turns cold. PFI's farmer-researchers have investigated questions such as which greens varieties can overwinter on their farms and when they should plant spinach for optimal harvest windows and yields.

Spinach is the classic green to overwinter. PFI farmer-researchers have observed they can reliably keep spinach alive throughout Iowa with some winter protection. Trials spanning two years and five farms have shown that planting spinach in early to mid-September usually results in higher total yields than waiting until later in the fall to plant. However, planting a second crop of fall spinach near the end of September can extend spring harvest windows until April in some conditions.

For example, in 2021-2022, Jon Yagla found that on his Iowa City, Iowa, farm, a mid-September seeding produced more than double the weight of spinach. It also spanned a longer harvest window than two later seeding dates.

Emily Fagan and Hannah Breckbill of Humble Hands Harvest in Decorah, Iowa, have taken part in two trials where they tried overwintering non-spinach varieties like kale, mustards, lettuces and herbs. They've learned they can get a good early-winter crop from some hardy varieties in a high tunnel, but will not bet on non-spinach greens making it to spring alive.

"My general impression of overwintering plants is that the conditions of the winter – for example, the timing of cold snaps and warm-ups – seem to matter a lot," Emily says. "My approach is to just keep trying. If something doesn't make it through winter well one year, it might do a great job the next."



Jon Yagla (above) and his spinach plots.



Dig Deeper

To learn even more about these projects and others going back to 1988, we encourage you to explore the research reports on our website at practicalfarmers.org/research.

To learn about joining PFI's Cooperators' Program,

contact Emma Link at emma.link@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661 to learn about joining PFI's Cooperators' Program.

This material is based in part on work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through grant 23SCBPIA1187 and by the Ceres Trust.

Cover Crops Show Promise for Expanding Fieldwork Days

Results are in from the first year of a PFI on-farm research trial looking at whether farmers who use cover crops have more days suitable for fieldwork. Farmers from 15 operations took part in the trial in 2024.

While more research is needed, most participants reported that in at least half or more of the weeks between April and November, they had more days suitable for fieldwork than the U.S. Department of Agriculture's average for their district.

The trial will continue in 2025, with a goal to note any differences from year to year. The data will also deepen our understanding of how cover crops can support farmers as they manage soil health and navigate weather-related challenges.

Read the results at practicalfarmers.org/research. ■

CALENDAR



PFI Events

Registration information for all PFI events can be found at practicalfarmers.org/events, or by calling the PFI office at (515) 232-5661.



PFI FIELD DAYS

PFI field day season is now underway! Refer to your 2025 Field Day Guide or visit practicalfarmers.org/events/field-day to see the remaining field days and register to attend. We look forward to seeing you on the farm!

JULY

JULY 11 • Small Grains Shared Learning Call | Noon-1 p.m.
Online | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls](https://practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls)

AUGUST

AUG. 1 • Small Grains Shared Learning Call | Noon-1 p.m.
Online | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls](https://practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls)

AUG. 5 • Virtual Cover Crop Workshop | 2-5 p.m.
Online | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events)

SEPTEMBER

SEPT. 5 • Small Grains Shared Learning Call | Noon-1 p.m.
Online | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls](https://practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls)

EVENTS IN SPANISH

To keep up with the latest on PFI's Latino program, subscribe to Sembrando Resiliencia at practicalfarmers.org/email-newsletter-subscribe.



Find PFI At

JUNE

JUNE 13 • Farm & Food Celebration
Grinnell, IA | [Learn more at extension.iastate.edu/ffed/cfs-annual-event](https://iastate.edu/ffed/cfs-annual-event)

JULY

JULY 23-25 • North American Agroforestry
Conference | Columbia, MO | [Learn more at centerforagroforestry.org/2025naac](https://centerforagroforestry.org/2025naac)

AUGUST

AUG. 5 • ISU Fruit and Vegetable Field Day
Ames, IA | [Learn more at iowaspecialtycrop.org/events/#!event-list](https://practicalfarmers.org/events/#!event-list)

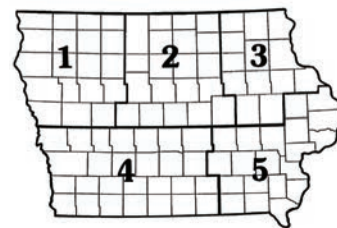


Homemade pie, berries, baked goods and ice cream are often a delicious perk of field days. What's your favorite summer treat?

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome, New Members!

From Feb. 18 – April 17, 2025



DISTRICT 1 - NORTHWEST

- Ritch and Cynthia Berkland – Cylinder
- Jeff and Collin Sporrer – Carroll

DISTRICT 2 - NORTH CENTRAL

- Mike Bassett – Ames
- Kevin Cole – Grafton
- Stuart McCulloh – Forest City
- Katie Olthoff – Stanhope
- Ryan Renaud – Alden

DISTRICT 3 - NORTHEAST

- John Bernau – Manchester
- Gina and Randy Gadiant – Cascade
- Levi Hart – Cresco
- Mitch Pfab – Manchester
- Kyle Spowart – Tripoli
- Nick Steffens – Quasqueton
- Andrew Willenborg – New Vienna

DISTRICT 4 - SOUTHWEST

- Jeremy Barrans – Lenox
- Chris Hildenbrand – Stuart
- Jennifer Kern – Lacona

- Austin Knight – Carlise
- Zach McCaw – Mills
- Michelle McCormick – Indianola
- Jeremy Oleson – Runnells
- Jason Pierce – Pleasantville
- Christina Riessen – Ankeny
- Mallory Rohwer – Ankeny

DISTRICT 5 - SOUTHEAST

- Jeff Disterhoft – North Liberty
- Drew Gieselman – Louisa
- Kerrie Willis – Washington
- Ryan Wolf – Keosauqua

DISTRICT 6 - OUT OF STATE

- Virginia Warheit – Berkeley, CA
- Blake Arnold – Sciota, IL
- Jacob Dohme – Broadlands, IL
- Reese Rathjen Amyx – Colona, IL
- Seth Lawrence – Brook, IN
- Chris Henry – Robinson, KS
- Craig Fischer – Sleepy Eye, MN
- Aaron Wills – Northfield, MN
- Brendon Blank – Ixonia, WI

- Thomas Campbell – Baldwin, WI
- John Campion – Reedsburg, WI
- Daniel Cornelius – Stoughton, WI
- Sara and Karl Faivre – Mt Horeb, WI
- Jeff Gaska – Beaver Dam, WI
- Kent McClurg – Viroqua, WI
- Brian Peters – West Bend, WI

Thank you
to our newest lifetime
members!

Ed & Mary Lou Gingerich
Parnell, IA

Kathy & Fred Eastman
Des Moines, IA

Lifetime membership is open to anyone, and confers the same benefits as regular membership – without any renewal notices! Learn more about this option at practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership.

PFI Current Enrollments

From June – September 2025

Habitat Incentives Program

ROLLING APPLICATION

practicalfarmers.org/habitat-incentives-program

Grazing Consultations

ROLLING APPLICATION

practicalfarmers.org/grazing-consultations

1-on-1 Land Matching

ROLLING APPLICATION

Contact *Martha McFarland* at *martha.mcfarland@practicalfarmers.org* or call our office at (515) 232-5661.

Cover Crop Cost-Share

SIGN UP TO BE NOTIFIED ABOUT OPEN ENROLLMENT

practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-cost-share

Cover Crop Business Accelerator

OPEN JUNE 9–JULY 14, 2025

practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-business-accelerator-program

Savings Incentive Program

OPENS IN AUGUST 2025

practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program

Sustainable Agriculture Business Incubator

OPENS IN AUGUST 2025

practicalfarmers.org/sustainable-agriculture-business-incubator

Nitrogen Rate Risk Protection Program

OPENS IN SEPTEMBER 2025

practicalfarmers.org/n-rate-risk-protection-program

Beneficial Insects Cost-Share

CLOSES SEPT. 1, 2025

practicalfarmers.org/beneficial-insect-cost-share

Research Trial Recruitment

OPENS IN SEPTEMBER 2025

Contact *Roberta Bianchin Rebesquini* at *roberta.rebesquini@practicalfarmers.org*

THE FINAL WORD



Field day season kicked off early for Spanish- and Swahili-speaking members across the state of Iowa from late March to the end of May. Folks learned about planning for the season, cover crops, seeding methods, value-added products and growing new veggies.

Clockwise from top left: (1) Alfred Matiyabo, part of the Land Access Program at the Johnson County Historic Poor Farm, explains his practices on his onion fields during the Swahili field day. (2) Max Chavez demonstrates his methods for transplanting peppers and hand-seeding small herbs in Carlisle, Iowa. (3) Jordan Clasen demonstrates using a Jang seeder for radishes and onions on his field in Earlham, Iowa. (4) Marcela Hurtado harvests a white radish from her field at the Global Food Project plots and explains how they differ from the more commonly known red radish. (5) Carly McAndrews explains the different starts used at Trowel & Error Farm near Iowa City, Iowa.

JOIN PFI

GROW YOUR FARM WITH PRACTICAL FARMERS. JOIN OR RENEW TODAY!

Want to join or renew online? Visit practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew.

MEMBER INFORMATION

Contact Name(s)*: _____

Farm or Organization Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____ County: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

* For Farm or Household membership, please list names of all persons included. For Organization membership, you may list up to three contact persons.

JOIN OR RENEW

1. I am joining at the level of:

- Access - \$25
 Individual - \$50
 Farm or Household - \$75

- Organization - \$150
 Lifetime Member* - \$1,200
* See details at bit.ly/PFI-lifetime

3. How many years of farming experience do you have?

- 0 6-10
 1-5 11 or more

2. Which category best describes you? (choose one)

- Farmer or farm operator
 Not farming yet, but would like to
 Farmland owner who does not actively farm myself
 Other: _____

4. How did you hear about PFI?

MEMBER BENEFITS

When you join our email discussion groups, you can network, build community and exchange ideas from anywhere, at any time. Sign up for as many groups as you'd like (and be sure to include your email address above)!

- Announcements Perspectives Field Crops Horticulture Livestock

Please add my farm to PFI's:

- Local Foods Directory Business Directory (Organization members only)

SUSTAIN PRACTICAL FARMERS WITH AN ADDITIONAL DONATION

For the sake of the long-term health and vitality of Practical Farmers of Iowa, we ask you to consider making a donation above and beyond your membership fee. Practical Farmers of Iowa is a 501(c)3 organization. Your gift is tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

I would like to make a one-time, tax-deductible donation to PFI in the amount of:

- \$1,000 \$500 \$250 \$100 \$50 \$ _____

Or, make a recurring monthly or quarterly donation. This will be automatically charged to your credit card on the first day of each month or quarter.

- Yes, I would like to give \$ _____ per month OR per quarter

PAYMENT

Membership Level\$ _____ per year for _____ year(s) = \$ _____

Additional Donation = \$ _____

TOTAL AMOUNT = \$ _____

- Check or money order is enclosed (Please make payable to "Practical Farmers of Iowa.")
 Credit card (Visa, MasterCard or Discover only)

Name on card _____ Number _____

Exp. Date _____ CVC# (3 digits) _____ Please automatically charge this credit card annually for membership

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Keeping Bases (and Fields) Covered

A red clover cover crop in Nick Sennert's field prepares the soil for corn planting. Read more on page 11 about how Nick and other farmers are choosing cover crops in the wake of more frequent extreme-weather events.