

the PRACTICAL FARMER

SUMMER 2026



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The Pursuit of Health

Your Generosity +
Farmer Innovation =
Vibrant Communities

2026 Field Day
Season Promo





A good farm dog waits patiently for a ride with the field day attendees. This photo was taken during last year's field day season at Robert and Ruth Harvey's farm near Redfield, Iowa, on Sept. 11.

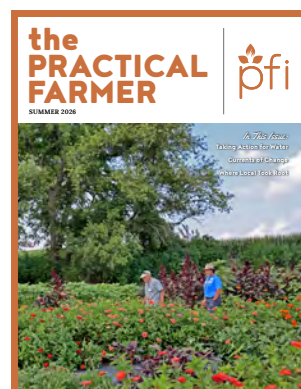


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ON THE COVER:

Jeff Sage and Tammy Faux wander through fields of flowers during Tricia and Seth Engelbrecht's field day near Waverly, Iowa, on Aug. 5, 2025. Turn to page 18 to find out more about this year's field day season!



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

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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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A Sneak Peek at Our Strategic Plan Priorities

Practical Farmers of Iowa takes our value of being farmer-led seriously. That's why, as we've embarked on strategic planning to set our priorities for 2027-2029, we collected surveys from more than 1,300 members. Additionally, more than 100 of you showed up to the listening and visioning sessions we held in March.

We'll formally analyze all this rich feedback you've shared to help us pick out major themes to focus on in the coming years. In the meantime, here are a few popular themes from your feedback:

- **Practical Farmers' farmer-led, supportive network matters, and preserving this network is a top priority:** PFI's credibility is strong because you, our farmer-centric membership, are our experts. Because of our big-tent ethos, farmers of all stripes are welcome and all of your voices matter. This network is hungry for honest peer experiences, not sales pitches from companies trying to sell you the nonexistent silver bullet.

This network provides ground-truthed experiences, including failures. High trust levels allow you to feel safe being vulnerable with each other, whether it's a failed research experiment or a candid conversation about mental health. We need to continue to place great value on creating this community.

- **Beginning farmers, land access and farm succession are existential issues that need to be solved.** A record amount of farmland is being transferred. Many landowners are aging, and they don't have successors identified. Many aspiring farmers want to farm, but accessing land is arduous and costly. Many aspiring farmers are first-generation farmers without family members who can train them.

You are asking for help finding successors, adopting creative ownership models, finding policy solutions that foster responsible land access, training beginning farmers and more. We need to grow more farmers, and remove barriers to land access, to be able to achieve our mission.

- **You want to grow crops beyond corn and soybeans, but you need markets to do so successfully.** Iowa soils and farmers are well-equipped to grow bumper crops of corn and soybeans, and we excel at this! But growing only corn and soybeans creates monocultures that aren't good for our soil, water or rural communities. You are interested in raising winter cereals,



From left to right: Larry Kallem, David Kennis, Caleb Akin and Jon Bakehouse discuss what Iowa should look like in 30 years, and how PFI can help work toward that vision, at a strategic planning listening session March 11 in Ames.

table food for local and regional food systems, more livestock integrated with crops and more. Iowa needs more resilient markets for a broader array of crops.

- **Water quality, soil health and public health are top of mind:** At the listening sessions in particular, participants voiced repeated concern about nitrate pollution, chemical drift, pesticide exposure and soil loss and erosion. You are interested in having farming practices tied to reduced inputs, clean water and soil stewardship. Many of you are already doing much to ensure clean water and healthy soils; more support and emphasis here is requested.

These are just a few things that came up again and again in our survey and listening sessions. We'll share a member survey summary with you in an upcoming issue of the magazine.

In the meantime, please read on to learn how Shanen Ebersole is marketing meat raised at Ebersole Cattle Company; how Shaffer Ridgeway, Mark Quee and Chie Fred Awumah are growing greens year-round; and how snakes, bats and vultures bring value to your farm. This edition also continues our exploration of how environmental and human health intersect with agriculture. In this installment, Jon Bakehouse and Jeff and Gayle Olson share how cancer has affected their families – and influenced their farming practices.

Thank you all for generously sharing your stories, as well as your priorities, so we can be better together in this supportive community.

In community,

Sally Worley

Giving and Growing

By Terri Mork Speirs

Welcome back to Giving and Growing, a new magazine section that spotlights the many ways that farmers and friends-of-farmers support PFI's mission of resilience through financial gifts. Each donation, great or small, is valued at PFI. Whether it's a gift of \$25 or \$25,000 (or more or less!), by check or credit card, through gifts of grain or a donor-advised fund – PFI donors are united in helping farmers to achieve their goals.

For this issue, we are pleased to focus on farmland donation and the value of “keeping the farm a farm.” Thank you to all PFI donors. Your generosity is vital to farmers' success.

Keeping the Farm a Farm: Angela and John Tedesco



Lifetime Members Angela and John Tedesco, 2017 PFI Landowner Owner Legacy Award recipients, donated their farm to PFI to ensure it remained a farm.



Angela sharing her story of land donation at the 2026 PFI Annual Conference short course.

In 2016, Angela and John Tedesco donated 13 acres of their 20-acre farmland to Practical Farmers. Why? Angela shared their story during the 2026 PFI Annual Conference short course on farmland transfer.

At Turtle Farm, located near Granger, Iowa, Angela grew organic vegetables to sell directly to consumers through her community-supported agriculture program – one of the first in the state. The farm served up to 180 CSA members with more than 30 types and hundreds of varieties of vegetables and fruit. When the Tedescos were ready to explore farm transfer options, they started by identifying their goals.

Their top priority was to “keep the farm a farm.” Due to Turtle Farm's urban proximity, the land was prime real estate for housing developers. To ensure that the farm stayed a farm, they considered several options, such as selling to another farmer, a cohousing solution, putting the land in a conservation easement or donating it to a nonprofit.

Angela encourages all farmland owners to consider goals and options. She and John decided to donate land to PFI because a fee was not required and a conservation easement was accepted. The farm would remain a farm. While saving on taxes was not a stated goal, the donation did offset the taxes on profits from the other 7 acres of farmland they sold to developers to finance their retirement.

Because the Tedescos served as PFI's first farmland donor, they also did something else. They inspired PFI's board of directors to examine PFI's role in owning or managing farmland and create policies for accepting farmland donations. The board determined that PFI's purpose in accepting a farmland donation is to facilitate farmland access and land stewardship.

Angela and John forged the way. The land they donated to PFI is now leased to Global Greens, providing land access to a new generation of farmers – including Esta Minani (you can read more about her on page 8 in this issue) – and continuing Angela's legacy of land stewardship. Presently, PFI has a total of three other farmland donations in the works – a big step forward in “keeping the farm a farm.” ■



For more information or conversation, contact PFI's development director, Terri Speirs, at terri.speirs@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661, Ext. 1066, or visit our website.

On-Farm Research Corner

Enterprising Horticulture Trials

By Emma Link

Farmers in PFI's Cooperators' Program are always testing the efficacy of new practices using rigorous on-farm research trials. Usually, their trials compare the yield outcomes of different crop or animal management practices, like strip-till versus no-till corn, weaning timing for goat kids or open-pollinated pepper varieties versus Carmen, a hybrid variety.

Sometimes, however, their trials extend beyond growing and land management methods into other aspects of their farming enterprises. In 2025, two groups of horticulture farmers completed unique trials to help them improve the profitability of their farms after harvest is over.

After hearing consumer advice about storing berries in vacuum-sealed jars for improved shelf life, Kim Andersen wondered whether switching from traditional vented clamshells to sealed packaging could be useful for extending how long she's able to sell her strawberries. During the 2025 strawberry season, Kim and fellow strawberry farmer Aaron Wills each conducted trials assessing strawberry shelf life in four packaging types: vented containers, unvented plastic clamshells, mason jars and vacuum-sealed mason jars.

They found that the unvented plastic clamshells did increase marketable lifespans by about two to five days compared to vented containers. But they also found that cooling the strawberries well before placing them in any type of



Kim Anderson and Aaron Wills each determined the shelf life of strawberries in four packaging types: vented plastic clamshells, unvented plastic clamshells, mason jars and vacuum-sealed mason jars.



Bins of Gilbertie tomatoes to be processed for seed at Carly and Ethan Zierke's farm near Calmar, Iowa. Carly says they process the seed tomatoes in large batches because it's more efficient with their time; the first step in processing is squishing the tomatoes up with their feet.

sealed container without ventilation holes – whether mason jars or unvented clamshells – was imperative to prevent condensation issues. As a result of her trial, Kim plans to switch to unvented plastic clamshells. She anticipates that this change will allow her to sell more berries fresh rather than in value-added products, reducing her labor costs.

In another trial, two farms looked at whether growing vegetable seed for contract makes economic sense compared with growing vegetables for direct-market sale. Vegetable farmers are often interested in alternative markets for crops. Many are attracted by the stability of seed contracts because you know exactly how much you'll be paid for a set weight of seed. For this trial, Hannah Breckbill and Carly and Ethan Zierke, both new to growing crops for seed, wanted to find out if the numbers really penciled out. In 2025, they tracked the costs and returns of growing cucumbers (Hannah) and tomatoes (Carly and Ethan) for seed versus for sale.

Both farms found that their seed contracts were profitable after accounting for labor, space and the cost of materials. But the seed contracts were less profitable per square foot and per labor-hour than their market sales of the same crops. Carly notes that because of the detailed time and weight tracking required, "this enterprise budget was challenging, but the data was even more useful than I expected. It helped us learn that our fresh-eating tomatoes are likely the better focus for our farm, so long as we are direct-marketing food." ■

Any PFI member is welcome to join the Cooperators' Program and propose trials on topics to help hone their management practices. If you would like to become involved, please contact Emma Link at emma.link@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661, Ext.1045.

To read results of trials going back to 2010, visit practicalfarmers.org and click on "Resources."

“Where Is the Lenga Lenga?”



Through her farm, Esta Minani is building community while connecting to her culture

By Rachel Burke

Esta Minani was born in the east-central African country of Burundi and started her farming journey after her family fled to a refugee camp in Congo when she was 6 years old. She later farmed with her husband in Tanzania, resettled in Vermont in 2008 and in 2014 moved to Iowa. There, in Des Moines, she started Lenga Lenga Farm, a 2-acre operation growing amaranth greens, also known as lenga lenga, tomatoes, squash, beans, eggplant and more.

“I grew up on a farm,” Esta says. “My parents made a living selling produce. That’s how we paid for school, clothes – everything. I started farming on my own at 16. I still helped my family, but I wanted to support myself.”

Esta has been part of the Practical Farmers of Iowa community for nearly 10 years. She’s easy to remember: warm, energetic and quick to connect. At the 2026 PFI Annual Conference, Esta led a session on growing culturally relevant crops, presenting in her first language, Kirundi. Her session required attendees to wear headsets broadcasting her words interpreted into English. Esta helped the audience understand that language doesn’t have to be a barrier. Rather, it can be a way to connect.

“We all farm, we all contribute to feeding each other,” she says. “Now I grow to feed my family healthy, organic food. But also, to build my own business. The community loves my vegetables – they keep coming back.”

Connecting to Culture

Farming is more than income. It’s wrapped up in Esta’s identity. “Farming is my culture,” she says. “It won’t leave me. I saw my parents farm, and I’ve taught my children. That’s how we remember where we come from, and how we guide our future.” All of Esta’s children grew up helping on the farm. One of her daughters now grows African vegetables in Davenport.

“She’s lucky. Her kids eat them,” Esta says of her daughter, pointedly smiling at her interpreter, Fermin Ntkizame. “Mine won’t,” Fermin confirms, a bit exasperated.

Fermin works with Global Greens, a program of Lutheran Services in Iowa that supports farmers who came to Iowa as immigrants and refugees with land, equipment, training and



From right to left: Esta and her fellow farmer, Bugenia, selling at the Global Greens Farmers Market in Des Moines, Iowa.

market access. He also has farming experience and interprets into six languages. “We have a strong support system,” Esta says. “I’ve taken classes to learn what crops grow well here and how to grow them.” That knowledge matters. Some of Esta’s crops need special care to succeed in Iowa’s climate.

“The African eggplant is in the greenhouse now,” Esta says. “I learned I must start it early in a warm space. Otherwise, I lose most of the crop.”

Esta has always farmed organically. That hasn’t changed. “In Africa, many farmers grow this way,” she says. “But here, there are new pests and diseases.” Some crops, like lenga lenga, grow easily. Others take more work. “Potatoes and eggplant have a lot of pests,” she says. Through Global Greens, Esta gets technical support to manage those challenges without changing her organic practices. She’s also focused on soil health. “Once I learned about cover crops, I couldn’t go back,” she says. “Now I plant into rye. It’s a good neighbor, and I can terminate it by hand.”

“We all farm, we all contribute to feeding each other. Now I grow to feed my family healthy, organic food. But also, to build my own business.

- Esta Minani

Culturally relevant food, and Esta's access to it, played a critical role in carving her path. When her family first arrived in Vermont, they were served chicken, bread, apples and other American standards. “I asked my husband, ‘Where is the lenga lenga? Where is the eggplant?’” she says. “How do we eat without our vegetables?”

Esta missed the nutrient-dense greens and medicinal plants she grew up with. So, she decided she would start growing them again. With help from the resettlement agency, she found land, but demand quickly outpaced what she could produce. “That’s one reason we moved to Iowa,” she says. “We heard people were farming here.” After she left, the Vermont program expanded its own farming efforts – something Esta helped spark.

For Esta, vegetables do more than nourish. “They prevent disease,” she says. “Green eggplant helps with blood sugar. In Africa, doctors would prescribe lenga lenga for anemia.”

Expanding Access

Some flavors can surprise new customers. One Global Greens staff member tried a particularly sour leaf and still jokes about it. “That’s healthy,” Fermin says, laughing. “It kills bad germs in

your body.” These crops are popular and often sell out quickly. Esta wants to grow more – especially medicinal plants – but access to seed is a challenge.

“We don’t always have the seeds we need,” she says. Even when seeds are available, saving them can be difficult. Cross-pollination with nearby plants can alter the next season’s crop. “One farmer saved African corn seed,” Esta says. “The next year, it was completely different because it crossed with American corn.”

Despite the challenges, Esta continues to expand her market. She sells through the Global Greens CSA, directly to community members and at the Global Greens International Market in Des Moines each Friday during the summer. She also grows some familiar crops to reach more customers. “I grow American vegetables too,” she says. “And we help people learn how to cook our foods. Global Greens shares recipes at the market.”

Looking ahead, Esta is focused on growth. She and a neighbor are exploring buying a tractor together, and she hopes to access more land. Still, she’s clear about what matters most. “I don’t need to go back to Africa now,” she says. “Because what I had there, I have here – a community, a farm. I feel at home.” ■



Esta, middle right, proudly posing with her husband, children and grandchildren.



Esta excitedly prepping her vegetable beds in early spring in Des Moines, Iowa.



Learn More

The Global Greens International Market takes place every Saturday through Oct. 31 from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at 1901 Carpenter Ave. in Des Moines. There, you can browse produce raised by Esta and others who are farming through LSI's Global Greens program.

For recipe ideas, visit lsiowa.org/category/global-greens-recipes.



Selling Her Story

Shanen Ebersole helped transform her farm's future by investing in herself

By Amos Johnson

The gavel at the auction rang out three times and the direction of Shanen Ebersole's life changed.

It was 2006, and Shanen sat alone in the sale barn gripped by anxiety, trying to calculate if the cattle she'd raised from birth had brought enough to cover the payments on the house and farm.

It was the first time she'd been to the sale barn herself, and she didn't know all the rules. Her Maine-Anjou cattle were separated into two groups that day: those who were all black, and those that had white markings on their flanks. The first group sold for full price, but the second group were labeled as Holsteins and sold for half what their siblings did. Because premium prices at the sale barn are based on Black Angus cattle, niche breeds like Maine-Anjou can be misunderstood, mislabeled and underpriced.

"I didn't know that you could say, 'No sale, we'll take them home if you're going to devalue them.' That's when I started deciding there's got to be a way to do it differently," Shanen says. "I just wanted to control my destiny a little bit more. I felt as though I had absolutely no control. None."

That's how the story starts. But it's not how it ends. Today, Shanen and her family – including her husband, Beau, and their three children – raise pastured and grass-fed beef at Ebersole Cattle Company, her family's farm nestled amidst the rolling hills outside Kellerton, Iowa. On a recent spring day, Shanen sat in her truck gazing out at the fields as gray rain slowly fell. Cattle meandered across the pasture to meet her for the promise of new, unrolled bales of hay. As she watched, her phone dinged in a steady stream of notifications. It was subscription renewal day for her customers.

"All my basic bills are paid because of today," Shanen says. "That's peace. It's allowing me to drive out and just look at my cows, just sit and breathe in that thankfulness and know that I am taken care of."

Discovery

Shanen's journey from sale barn anguish to rainy day contentment hinged, she says, on investing in herself through education. "In the beginning, it was free field days and seminars because that's what I could afford at the time." It was at a PFI annual conference where she started to learn more about grass-fed beef, direct marketing and the importance of knowing her numbers.



Shanen and Beau Ebersole

Photo courtesy of Shanen Ebersole

"One of the biggest things I learned was from [longtime PFI farmer] Tom Cory. He says that sustainability has to include financial sustainability," Shanen says. "All the marketing in the world doesn't do any good if you don't have a good-enough profit margin."

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic boosted demand for local food. Shanen happily leaned into that increase. But she also knew she couldn't rest on this unexpected boost. "I saw that after this bump there was going to be a downhill slide. So, I decided I need to learn more about marketing."

Shanen took an online course from a farm business consulting company called Farm Rebel. She learned that she needed to really "know" her customer. That meant figuring out what her ideal customer would be like based on a blend of her best existing customers. Shanen gave this imaginary person the nickname "Healing Yourself Kathy." From Shanen's experience, this Kathy is concerned with what goes into her food and how it was raised.

Now, when working on content for marketing, Shanen envisions speaking directly to Kathy. "Now it's kind of second nature, because I know who she is. But starting out, I had to actively think: 'Who is she? How am I helping her? What problems am I solving for her?'"

Connecting

Finding ways to reach and connect with more potential "Kathys" posed the next learning opportunity. Driving traffic to the farm's website is one way to connect with a target audience. But it takes a consistent and multipronged approach. "It's not a

build-it-and-they-will-come thing,” Shanen says. She decided to start by posting on social media, doing “tons and tons and tons of organic posts.”

Shanen made a rule for herself that every time she opened Facebook, TikTok or any other social media app, she had to make a new post for Ebersole Cattle Company before she let herself scroll. The posts don’t have to be homeruns every time, Shanen is quick to say. “Done is better than perfect. Do it crappy. You’ve got to at least do it crappy, because then the next time you’ll do it a little better, or you’ll at least learn something.”

Eventually, Shanen learned that she loves to write newsletter emails because it’s where she can let her storytelling voice loose. But even in a medium she’s comfortable in, she’s surprised with which posts resonate most. One email that led to the most sales was a “raw, horrible, crying post” about the grief of losing a calf, then sitting beside and tending to the mother cow in the aftermath. “I thought it was a bad email about a bad day,” Shanen says. But the honesty reinforced people’s idea of Shanen as someone they can trust to care deeply for her animals and the quality of life they live.

Being honest is central to how Shanen tells stories and builds her farm’s brand. “In an AI [artificial intelligence] world, people want authenticity right now. So just be you,” Shanen says. “If you’re marketing and pretending to be someone else, it’s not going to come across as genuine.” She’s found that if she tries too hard to develop a script, it comes across as “salesy.” But if she just imagines speaking directly to her “Kathy,” then the words flow more naturally.

Showing your customers who you are is vital when direct-marketing, Shanen says. This transparency is what distinguishes her from a grocery store. “People aren’t buying beef. They’re buying my ranch,” she says. “They’re buying my story, my details, because they believe in the story.” Failure to make this distinction can lead to low sales, Shanen says. “The reason you’re not selling is

**“People aren’t buying beef.
They’re buying my ranch.
They’re buying my story, my
details, because they believe
in the story.”**

- Shanen Ebersole

because customers don’t see you as any different than a grocery store. You need a face, you need a name, you need a story.”

It’s clear that Shanen’s story resonates with people. Her sales have continued to rise since the pandemic surge. She likes to frame her success by the number of families fed. Last she counted, it was 480. Shanen currently sells more beef than she can raise on the farm – which is why she’s working with partners to develop Beefmaps.com. It’s a website that maps and links to farms across the globe that sell directly to consumers. And her email list has risen to 25,000 subscribers.

Growing

For Shanen, arriving at this success with marketing grew out of her efforts to find a new path for her farm. Along the way, she discovered she enjoys telling her farm’s story. But Shanen recognizes that not everyone thrives in marketing. She offers a couple of thoughts that might help. “We get into this business because we like farming, we like feeding people,” Shanen says. “But none of that happens if we don’t market ourselves.”

She points out that not all marketing is easy for her either, and there are still

elements she doesn’t enjoy. But she tries to lean into those difficulties. Her current challenge is to learn to use the Facebook ads system. As she grapples with it, she reminds herself that it’s important to her bigger goal. “We don’t get to do what we love,” she says, “if we don’t do the marketing work that needs to be done.”

Shanen also says that it’s okay to work with outside help to get your marketing system off the ground. She recommends finding people and resources that can make the process easier – and investing in them. Working with marketing experts is an opportunity to learn and improve your own skills at the same time.

Finally, be creative. Marketing comes in many forms, Shanen says. She regularly speaks in front of community groups, educating them about farming and healthy eating. She also donates meat and eggs to community fridges and offers customers the chance to contribute. This kind of personal engagement with the local community builds networks and counts as marketing. And it fits seamlessly into Shanen’s philosophy. “I believe marketing is nothing less than serving my customers,” she says.

So where does Shanen’s farm story end? There’s no way to know. For now, it’s still going and growing. There’s always work to be done on the farm, and there’s always marketing to be done to keep the farm going. But Shanen embraces the work for these moments on a rainy day – when she can just sit and watch the cows. “This is my happy place.” ■



Shanen smiles as she works with her cattle herd on her farm outside Kellerton, Iowa.

Your Generosity + Farmer Innovation = Vibrant Communities

By Terri Mork Speirs

**We are extremely grateful for your support in fiscal year 2025
(Oct. 1, 2025–Sept. 30, 2025).**

PFI's members, donors, sponsors and grantors provided vital financial resources to serve our farmers' direct needs. When farms succeed, so does the whole community! As financial supporters of PFI, you are key partners with farmers who steward land, water and air while also increasing profits and nourishing the community.

Your support added up to \$837,240 in donations and sponsorships, and \$356,665 in memberships – providing critical, flexible funding for farmer-led education, research and innovation. Plus, additional public and private support grew our cost-share programs.

In total, Practical Farmers steered \$21 million in activity in fiscal year 2025. We kindly refer you to the 2025 Annual Report (printed and online) for a full reporting of impact. And we are pleased to share the following snapshot of what we accomplished together:

- **PFI's membership base grew to 9,912 individuals.**
- **Our programs helped 2,430 farmers plant cover crops on 903,193 acres.**
- **We organized 287 farmer-led educational events, welcoming 7,086 attendees.**
- **Farmers completed 185 on-farm research trials with PFI's guidance.**
- **PFI helped 91 land seekers find land that matches their farming needs.**

This issue includes a listing of PFI's supporters in fiscal year 2025. Please let me know if you'd like your name listed in a different way in the future, or if you see needed corrections. Your generous financial support is greatly appreciated. Thank you!



Terri Mork Speirs
Development Director | Practical Farmers of Iowa



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Caption: PFI board members Tim Youngquist (center left) and Wade Dooley (center right) joined PFI's table at the Community Foundation Greater Des Moines annual luncheon celebrating philanthropy. Others at the table with Tim and Wade include (clockwise from left) John Hogeland and Beth Hoffman, Angela and John Tedesco, Fred and Charlotte Hubbell, Sally Worley and Whitney Clasen.

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Katherine McCormick and Rakesh Kumar

When Katherine McCormick and Rakesh Kumar decided to get married, they also decided to do something different with their wedding guests. Instead of setting up a traditional gift registry, they asked their friends to donate to organizations important to the couple. One of their suggestions was Practical Farmers.

Katherine had become familiar with PFI 10 years prior when she met PFI members throughout Iowa while working on behalf of a national environmental nonprofit. Friends of the newlyweds donated to PFI to celebrate their wedding and honor their values. PFI is grateful to receive permission to share their gorgeous photo from their family-only civil ceremony in Des Moines, Iowa, which was held prior to their wedding in Chicago.

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Those who have included a donation to PFI in their will, estate planning or farm transfer planning

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Rich Pirog

"I believe in PFI's values and mission. I want to continue to see it grow into the future."

– Rich Pirog

Rich Pirog is a longtime PFI member and a PFI Sustainable Agriculture Achievement Award recipient. His career tells the story of his values. Rich is the former PFI interim executive director, former associate director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and recently retired director of the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems.

Rich is also a member of PFI's Legacy Society, a growing list of people who have indicated that they've included a planned gift to PFI in their will or estate plans.

There are many ways to make a planned gift to PFI – ensuring that your values live into the future. These gifts also provide for your loved ones, and can help them save on taxes. For instance, you can:

- **Designate part of your retirement plan for PFI**
- **Leave a life insurance policy**
- **Make a gift through your will or trust**
- **Make a gift now and receive income for life with a charitable gift annuity**

Consult your legal and financial advisors for guidance on planned giving tools that will work best for you.



PFI's field days are free and open to the public – thanks to our generous sponsors and other funders – allowing for robust farmer-to-farmer connection. For example, last year Sunderman Farm Management helped sponsor the field day hosted by PFI lifetime member Jeremy Gustafson who farms near Boone, Iowa. Pictured here is Jeremy's tabletop demonstration of how cover cropping holds soil together, almost like chocolate cake. This field day topped off by serving attendees actual cake as a celebration of PFI's 40th anniversary.

Thank You to Our Sources of Grant Funding in Fiscal Year 2025

Federal Funding Sources

Environmental Protection Agency Gulf of Mexico Program
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PFI member Jon Robertson of Hudson, Iowa, hosted our supply chain partners on his farm to show how their support is making a difference. In this photo, Jon (center) explains his installation of saturated buffers, a water conservation option that removes little to no land from production, requires little maintenance and does not affect crop yields when placed in ideal sites.

Visible behind the group in yellow is a field Jon enrolled in PF's cover crop cost-share program. On-farm visits give supply chain partners firsthand insight into farmers' priorities and challenges. We appreciate their partnership and financial support as well as their eagerness to learn. ■



2026 PFI FIELD DAY SEASON



It's field day season



And you know what to do



Go meet up with others



as curious as you.



With your cap on your head



And your feet in your boots



See what others are up to



While growing your roots.

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 36 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.



Feeding Green

Farmers across Iowa are growing a range of leafy greens to provide their communities with healthy food – and a taste of home

By Ashly Senske

When Chie Fred Awumah left home – the village of Kedjom Ketinguh in northwest Cameroon – for study and work abroad, he never expected to find njama njama, a leafy green native to the region that he grew up eating.

“My village is known for its njama njama production,” Awumah says. Through his travels, first living in Dubai and then in Germany, he never saw the plant.

That changed unexpectedly in 2017, when Awumah arrived in Des Moines to begin a new job with Corteva Agriscience in nearby Johnston. A friend took him to the Downtown Farmers’ Market, and to his surprise, he found njama njama. “I was shocked,” he says. He was staying in a hotel at the time and had no way to cook the plant. But he used the opportunity to start building his community and got the name and number of the grower.



African Greens in Iowa

Now, almost a decade later, Awumah is the one providing African leafy greens to his community. In 2023, he started his farm business, AGCRUNCH LLC, growing specialty vegetables along with culturally relevant crops from across the African continent. His goal is to bring a little taste of home to the community he has cultivated in central Iowa. Many of these are greens Awumah once thought were uncommon outside of West Africa – including waterleaf, bitter leaf and njama njama, the three staple leafy greens he grows.

That term, “leafy greens,” refers informally to any plant eaten specifically for its leaves. Around the world, people are eating all sorts of leaves in all sorts of ways as part of a balanced diet. Many of these plants are highly nutritious. Across Iowa, farmers are growing a variety of these dietary mainstays, from the well-known lettuces, kales and arugulas to lesser-known greens that are quietly feeding communities around the state while offering something just as important as nutrition: a taste of home.



For Awumah, encountering njama njama in Des Moines was the start of a process of discovery. Over the years, he’s been learning new names for the leafy greens he grew up with, along with new markets. Njama njama, also known as garden huckleberry, is a member of the nightshade family like tomatoes and eggplants (hence another of its names, African nightshade). But instead of growing it for its fruit, njama njama is cultivated for its leaves, which are bitter until cooked. In Cameroon, njama njama leaves are traditionally paired with fufu corn, a dough-like side dish, or other starches.

As a tropical plant, njama njama, grows well in Iowa’s hot and humid summers. “In Iowa, the crop has a compressed growth cycle, starting slowly in spring, growing quickly in summer and ending with the first fall frost,” Awumah says. It also typically requires irrigation and soil amendments in Iowa, he says. But if weeds are controlled early in the growing season, it’s relatively easy to grow.



For Awumah, the biggest challenge is getting good seeds each year and finding space to grow more. He says he enjoys growing food for his community and hopes he “can expand my market to include more Iowans.”

Currently, Awumah sells his produce at the farmers market and is happy to share recipes and educate people who may not be familiar with his offerings. He encourages people to give these plants a try and is currently looking for ways to work with local chefs. His vision is to create unique African-Iowan dishes that can introduce more people to the flavors of his homeland.

Cabbage: An Unexpected Leaf

At Scattergood Friends School near West Branch, Iowa, farm manager Mark Quee oversees the entire spectrum of food production for the school – including ensuring that students eat their greens throughout the year.

One of those plants is cabbage, a large group of plants in the brassica family, which also includes broccoli, kale and many other leafy greens. While many types of cabbage are grown across the world, the forms commonly found in the U.S. include red, green and savoy, which can all come in a range of varieties. Some Chinese cabbages, a closely related species that includes napa cabbage and bok choy, are also widely available here.

While it may not be the first plant we picture when thinking of leafy greens, cabbages are essentially clusters of leaves that grow as heads or on stalks. Mark grows multiple cabbage varieties throughout the year – some outdoors in the summer, others in high tunnels through the winter. “It’s a nice proletariat vegetable,” Mark says. “There’s nothing flashy about it.”

Some cabbage varieties, particularly red and green varieties that form a tight head, store well. In late March, the school’s chefs are still pulling cabbage harvested in the fall out of their walk-in coolers. Meanwhile, Mark tends to napa cabbage in a high tunnel, which protects it from low outdoor temperatures and



Awumah's fields in Johnston, Iowa.

wind; he harvests these near the end of April. Mark advises would-be cabbage growers to look for varieties resistant to black rot – especially if you plan to grow them with other brassicas – and use fertile soil.

Southern Greens

In Waterloo, Iowa, Shaffer Ridgeway has been growing vegetables since 2019 at Southern Goods Farm. As the name suggests, his focus is on Southern produce. He grows the things he grew up eating on his family’s farm in Alabama, including purple hull peas, mustard greens, turnip greens and collard greens alongside other crops like tomatoes and cucumbers.

Collard greens are a staple of Southern cooking. Known for their dark green leaves and high nutritional value (they’re an excellent source of vitamins A, C and K), they are typically boiled or sautéed until soft. Shaffer’s favorite way to cook them of late is by sautéing them in bacon grease.

“Most of the people that I knew growing up overcooked them,” says Shaffer, who also serves on PFI’s board of directors. “Part of the challenge now is trying to get people to not overcook them, to realize that we need those vitamins.” He grows collard greens outdoors and sells them all season long. They’re relatively easy to maintain, he adds, though as with many leafy vegetables he often battles flea beetles.

Black and African American residents make up around 17% of Waterloo’s population, according to 2024 data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey – the highest percentage of any community in Iowa. For Shaffer, this means he’s never had trouble finding a market for his produce. “I still deal with a lot of people who grew up in Mississippi, and so they grew up eating collard greens and purple hull peas,” he says. “When they see us have them, they’re like, ‘What? I can’t believe that somebody in Waterloo has these. I’ve been looking for some of these.’ That is a great feeling.”

He sells produce at his local farmers markets, as well as wholesale. One of those accounts is the local food bank. A couple of years ago, Shaffer delivered 300 pounds of greens there each week. He learned they were running out of his greens within two days – a disclosure that shocked him and stirred mixed feelings.

“That means we have a lot of hungry people in our community, a lot of people using those services,” Shaffer says. “But it also made me feel good to know that those people were getting some high-quality fruits and vegetables.” ■

PFI’s Savings Incentive Program

In 2025, Awumah joined PFI’s Savings Incentive Program as part of the Class of 2026. The two-year program offers mentorship, business support from PFI staff and a dollar-for-dollar savings match up to \$4,000 after successfully finishing the program. Participants make valuable connections with other farmers that can help them further nurture their farm’s growth.

Awumah says he wanted to join SIP for the financial support and mentorship – and to access “resources and guidance needed to improve my farming practices and expand my market reach.”

To learn more about SIP, contact Savanah Laur at (515) 232-5661 or savanah.laur@practicalfarmers.org.

The Pursuit of Health

In the face of cancer diagnoses, farmers are finding ways forward with hope and consideration of future generations

By Solveig Orngard



Symptoms

Jon Bakehouse felt healthy. He had been farming full-time for nearly 30 years on his family's farm near Hastings in southwest Iowa. The herd of cattle and gently rolling hills had kept him in good shape. But one moment, in spring 2024, he was rolling up electric fencing when his hands and feet started to feel odd. Then his heart was racing. In a short time, he had his son take him to the emergency room.

So began months of medications, tests and heart procedures that continually left Jon in no better condition with frequent episodes of ventricular tachycardia, a sudden racing heart rate. Farming came to a standstill. "I went from working 16 hours a day, running around, moving cattle and all that kind of stuff to not be able to do anything," Jon says. "That was a huge blow."

Diagnosis

The real issue? Stage four non-Hodgkin lymphoma. It was finally found in late summer, several months after Jon's first symptoms appeared. Jon is one of an estimated 175,000 Iowans who have either survived or are currently living with cancer in 2026, according to the Iowa Cancer Registry's annual "Cancer in Iowa" report, published in March. Since 2023, Iowa has had the second-highest rate of new cancers in the United States, and it's one of only three states with a rising cancer rate.

But why?



Jon Bakehouse

In March, two weeks after the Iowa Cancer Registry report came out, The Harkin Institute and Iowa Environmental Council released an 89-page report exploring the environmental risk factors implicated in Iowa's high rates of cancer. The report named exposure to pesticides; high levels of "forever chemicals" known as PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, and nitrates in Iowa waterways; and radon as leading carcinogens in Iowa. These are in addition to factors like smoking, alcohol use and exposure to ultraviolet light.

With so many potential causes of cancer, it is impossible in many cases to identify an exact cause of any one cancer diagnosis. But the Iowa Cancer Registry report cites findings from the Agricultural Health Study – one of the world's largest and longest-running ongoing studies of agriculture exposures and health – that associate non-Hodgkin lymphoma with at least seven types of pesticides used in Iowa agriculture.

The subsequent report from The Harkin Institute and IEC identified the three most common pesticides in Iowa as acetochlor, atrazine and glyphosate, with the latter two associated with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

The Search for a Cause

Farmers across Iowa use pesticides for a host of helpful reasons – staving off crop disease, killing or deterring pests, fighting weeds and terminating cover crops. For many looking to improve soil health with no-till and cover crops, pesticides make it possible to still grow high-yielding cash crops.

Jon's family has grown corn and soybeans for decades. Seeking soil health benefits, he and his father implemented no-till in the late 1990s and eventually added cover crops to the mix in the early 2010s, around the time that Jon learned about Practical Farmers of Iowa. Cover crops brought even more benefits – water infiltration and nutrient fixation among them. But Jon noticed he had to use even more herbicide than before to effectively terminate the cover crops.

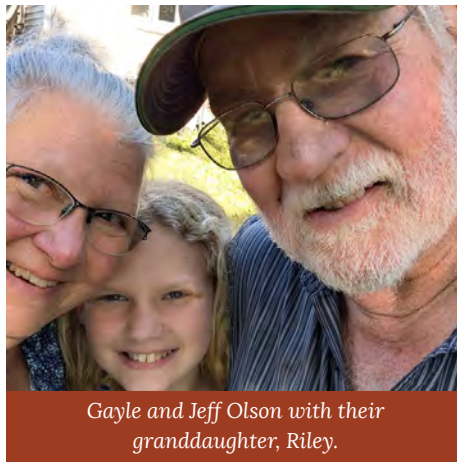
Having read the pesticide labels, he was concerned about the possible ramifications of using them but was careful to use personal protective equipment and follow the labelled instructions. About five years ago, he started trialing a roller crimper to mechanically kill his cover crops instead of applying chemicals. "I thought, 'Oh, cancer is something that other people will get. I'm fine because

I'm taking precautions.' But, wrong answer."

Jon can't say with confidence that his work with pesticides caused his cancer. But he, like many Iowans, has seen the recent reports of Iowa's high cancer rates. He likens Iowa's cancer diagnosis to his own. "It's been there a long time, but suddenly it's front and center in everybody's mind. I think we're in that period of panic and diagnosis, so to speak. And I just hope we can take this opportunity to say, 'What can I do right now that would help resolve the problem?'"

Questions of Health

Gayle and Jeff Olson hold similar concerns about their work and health. They raise corn, soybeans, rye, barley, alfalfa, cattle and cover crops extensively on their farm near Winfield in southeast Iowa. Jeff's father, Harold, died 12 years ago from non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Harold was also a farmer and developed a sensitivity to organophosphates in chemically treated seed long before his lymphoma diagnosis. Consequently, Jeff would often fill the planter in his dad's place. Despite making many changes to the farm, Jeff continues to use some



Gayle and Jeff Olson with their granddaughter, Riley.

chemicals for weed control and to terminate cover crops.

Jeff, like Jon, knows there are no clear answers that can pinpoint the exact cause of a cancer diagnosis. And there are other types of cancer – lung, prostate, breast, skin, to name a few – that are more prevalent in Iowa than lymphoma. But Jeff carries with him the fear of potential health problems related to his decades-long exposure to pesticides. "I'm hoping I'm lucky with all the chemical exposure that I've had," he says. "I bet in 20 or 30 years, we'll be saying, 'Why were we messing with that stuff?'"

Gayle voices additional concern about pesticides getting into public water

supplies and private wells that are not tested. "We're on rural water, but they don't test for some of the pesticides as they do for nitrates," she says. "There are a lot of other chemicals that could be in the water that never get tested for."

Since they first started farming, Jeff and Gayle have taken many steps to improve health and safety on their farm. They make sure to always wash farm clothes separately from all other clothes. In the past two decades, they have transitioned to organic on fields they own that are nearest to their house, which are about 20% of their total acres.

The Olsons haven't been able to cut out chemicals on the farm, but they limit chemical use where they can with the labor they have. They also focus on building soil health using extended rotations and cover crops and integrating livestock, working with neighbors to implement those practices as well.

Steps Forward

Two years on from his diagnosis, Jon is now well enough to continue farming, thanks to effective medical treatment

(Continued on page 24 →)

"I'm hoping I'm lucky with all the chemical exposure that I've had. I bet in 20 or 30 years, we'll be saying, 'Why were we messing with that stuff?'" – Jeff Olson



Harold Olson, Jeff's father



Jeff with his Minneapolis Moline tractor.

“I just hope we can take this opportunity to say, ‘What can I do right now that would help resolve the problem?’” – Jon Bakehouse

– though his family made the difficult decision to sell their cattle earlier in his health crisis. Last year, Jon roller-cripped cover crops on all his acres in his effort to further reduce chemical inputs. He contemplates the farm’s ongoing drift from its original state – from tallgrass prairie to diversified crop-livestock farm to just corn, soybeans and cover crops – and wonders what his land would be like as 750 acres of prairie.

Jon says it would be easy to give up on trying to do things differently. He already has cancer – why keep working to minimize the potential causes? The answer, he says, is in thinking beyond ourselves. “We’re thinking in isolation of one another, very separately. And I think that is a natural extension of a disconnection from the land.” He likens his ongoing effort to minimize potential harms to a marathon relay race. “Somebody has handed us the baton, and we do the best we can to make sure we’re running at a reasonable pace and then handing the baton off to the next person or generation.”

Like Jeff and Gayle, Jon believes he must do what he can to make Iowa a better place for the future. Working with others, whether they are landlords, tenants, neighbors or fellow PFI members, creates a sturdier foundation for change to happen. Cancer – and not knowing the exact cause of it – is scary. So is the reality of Iowa’s high cancer rates.

But Jon says it’s vital we don’t let our fears get in the way of finding solutions. “Don’t get discouraged about the big picture,” he says, “because it’s easy to get paralyzed with that. Instead, let’s focus on connecting with the land, with our environment and with each other.” ■



Read Part 1 of our exploration of how farming intersects with environmental and human health in our Spring 2026 issue. The story, “Currents of Change,” looks at how farmers and landowners are working to support cleaner water.



Jon’s roller-crimper in 2022 after roller-cripping a strip of rye cover crop as part of a research trial through PFI’s Cooperators’ Program. Photo courtesy of Jon Bakehouse.

Learn More



Read the Iowa Cancer Registry’s 2026 “Cancer in Iowa” report at shri.public-health.uiowa.edu/iowa-cancer-reports.

Read The Harkin Institute and Iowa Environmental Council report, “Environmental Risk Factors and Iowa’s Cancer Crisis,” at iaenvironment.org/our-work/cancer-and-environmental-risk-factors-in-iowa/.

Care, Family, Community

The Drost family is dedicated to supporting each other while caring for land and community

By Emma Liddle

If there are three words that would best sum up Drost Family Farm, it would be care, family and community.

Jackson and Amanda Drost farm near Oskaloosa, Iowa, with their two sons – Richard, 11, and Andy, 6. The farm itself is a testament to diversification. The Drosts raise corn, soybeans, alfalfa, small grains, hay, oats and pasture. They also manage a cow-calf operation and do custom work. Diversification requires additional thought, effort and risk, and the Drosts are committed for the long haul.

“If we take care of these farms like we take care of each other, they will take care of us,” Jackson says.

Care

The Drosts flew on their first cover crop in 2010 and have since expanded to covering all their fields annually. While using primarily rye and oats, they have begun adding other species like turnips and camelina to further diversify.

Jackson and Amanda also employ many sustainable practices, including using over 100 sediment basins, terraces, buffer strips, grassed waterways, a saturated buffer and land they’ve enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. “Conservation was taught to us from the generation before, and conservation has also become a major focus for us,” Jackson says.

The Drost family’s commitment to stewardship and innovation has also earned recognition beyond their farm. In 2023, Jackson received Peoples Company’s inaugural “Farmer of the Year” award, which recognizes land stewardship, conservation and responsible land management. For the Drosts, the award embodies many of the same principles that guide their operation each day: improving soil health, embracing conservation practices and making decisions with future generations in mind.

That focus became even more important when the family expanded their operation in Mahaska County in 2019. Additional acres

brought new opportunities but also reinforced the family’s belief that good land management requires a long-term outlook.

Family

Family farming has been a tenet of the Drosts for generations. Jackson developed his passion for farming young – “I’d say I started farming the day I was born,” he says – and he’s passed that passion on to his sons.

In 2020, the oldest son, Richard, planted his first crop of popcorn after Jackson showed him how he grew it as a kid. “That first year, he hand-picked every ear himself and spent the winter after school shelling popcorn with Grandpa in the shop,” Jackson says. Richard wanted to grow more and try selling the kernels, at which point his younger brother Andy got involved. Andy helps with the sales and promotion side, making short videos for social media and even giving a small talk to his class at school.

“Richard’s grown more each year. In 2024, he planted four times what he did the year before,” Jackson says. “He keeps track of expenses, pays his cousins and neighbors to help pick and covers his own costs – except for the land.” In January, Richard and Andy, with help from their parents, presented about Drost Brothers Popcorn at PFI’s 2026 Annual Conference, to highly positive reviews.

For her part, Amanda grew up on a small, fourth-generation dairy farm in northeast Iowa and understands the challenges and opportunities that come with agriculture. Both Jackson and Amanda work off-farm, Jackson for a lighting company and Amanda in marketing for a local hospital. Between on-farm work, off-farm jobs and two busy school-age boys – and their popcorn business – the Drosts find themselves pulled in many directions.

At the end of the day, they understand the stakes and take ample time to support each other. Jackson and Amanda feel the popcorn business is helping Richard and Andy learn valuable lessons about business, marketing,

the cyclical nature of farming and community engagement. Those lessons, they say, will carry forward regardless of whether the boys choose to keep their business going.

Community

The entire Drost family is also involved in their local community, through PFI and otherwise. They partner with Iowa Learning Farms to implement sustainable farming practices and share their experience, and they are actively involved in the Iowa Soybean Association. Amanda is also involved with Mahaska-Marion Women, Land & Legacy, a U.S. Department of Agriculture education and outreach program.

Richard and Andy are also getting involved. In 2024, the boys began selling Drost Brothers Popcorn products at local youth sporting events, including Little League games they were playing in. The next year, they expanded and started offering sampler boxes at local retail and grocery stores. That money stays in the community, helping the Drosts succeed and aid others.

The Drosts don’t farm because it’s easy. They farm because they care – about the land, the vocation and their children’s future. They take pride in what they produce, and how they produce it. “In small towns, people support each other, and we want our boys to grow up seeing the importance of giving back and staying involved,” Amanda says.

In late 2025, Jackson and Amanda became lifetime members of PFI. Their rationale for doing so embodies their values. “We choose to support PFI through a lifetime membership because sustainability, soil health and being good stewards of the land does not stop from year to year,” Jackson says. “Continuing support for PFI and the programs they do to support conservation in farming is ongoing and we are honored to join them in the valuable work they do.” ■

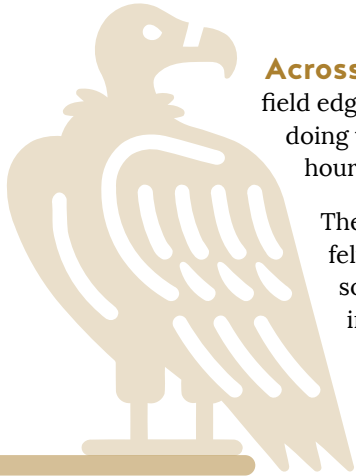


The (Un)Vaunted Vulture

and Other Misfits

While stigma, fear and frustration have dogged some of society's "less cuddly" creatures, three PFI members share why they're welcoming these unsung species on their farms.

By Vanya North



Across Iowa farms, a quiet and unseen workforce is on the job. Snakes glide through grass field edges, eating rodents before they can reach the grain bin. Owls and hawks patrol fence lines and buffers doing the same thing, no traps needed. As night falls, bats take flight, consuming up to 1,000 insects per hour – including many that could find their way to crops, such as cucumber beetles and corn rootworms.

These animals require no purchased food or fence. They go mostly unnoticed. Yet their contributions are felt across the farm. While these species – and others, like spiders, coyotes, foxes, wasps and other sometimes contested critters – are sometimes viewed as pests, nuisances or worse, they provide invaluable services to row crop and horticultural farmers alike.

As the following stories from PFI members show, leaving these wild neighbors a little space to live on the farm can benefit both people and the environment.

Vultures

Turkey vultures are a common sight at Gibraltar Farm, a multigenerational, diversified crop and livestock operation near Iowa Falls, Iowa. John Gilbert, who farms there with his family, expresses awe as he describes the birds. "The vultures love our valley," he says. "They can soar round and round on the thermals above our farm for hours without beating their wings at all."

John's admiration contrasts with more widespread social attitudes. These oft-maligned birds, and their vulture cousins across the globe, have been the subjects of harmful myths for centuries. Contrary to popular depictions, turkey vultures don't attack live animals or spread disease. In fact, they survive almost entirely on carrion (though they do occasionally eat insects and decaying vegetables, according to the Audubon Society).

Turkey vultures play a vital ecological role by acting as nature's cleaning crew, rapidly consuming dead animals before disease can spread. By removing the carcasses, vultures help limit the growth of harmful bacteria and pathogens that could affect people, pets and livestock.

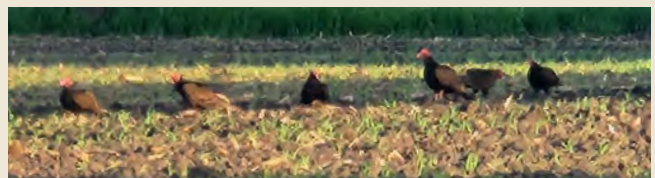
How do they avoid getting sick themselves? The Cornell Lab of Ornithology notes that vultures have several unique adaptations – including extremely acidic digestive systems that can neutralize dangerous microbes, like the bacteria that cause anthrax, rabies, botulism and other dangerous infections. By quickly eating dead animals, vultures help reduce the risk of disease outbreaks. Their featherless

heads help keep them clean when eating. And turkey vulture poop has unique sanitizing properties too – it actually kills pathogens.

The vultures who live near John's farm have plenty to sustain them, thanks to suitable roosting habitat on his land. He welcomes these misunderstood neighbors and the service they provide. He says they often take up residence in his bur oak trees and clean up squirrel and rabbit bits left by hawks. John has even noticed a "time-share" on his land: When the vultures vacate, bald eagles move in to take their place.

John's live-and-let-live philosophy extends to other species too – like the badgers that dig holes in the farm's terraces. Instead of reaching for traps, John accepts digging as their nature and simply fills the holes back in whenever he can. He also plants legumes and clover as cover crops, indirectly providing additional habitat. This approach helps the farm be profitable while fostering a functional ecosystem.

"We don't feel we have a big right to say who our neighbors are on this farm," John says. "We are caretakers and coinhabitants of the land, and the wildlife that lives on it."



Turkey vultures at John Gilbert's farm near Iowa Falls, Iowa.

Photo courtesy of John Gilbert

“We don’t feel we have a big right to say who our neighbors are on this farm. We are caretakers and coinhabitants of the land, and the wildlife that lives on it.”

– John Gilbert

Snakes, Vultures and More

Dennis McLaughlin holds a similar view. His 320-acre diversified crop and livestock farm in Warren County, Iowa, which has been in his family since 1854, is more than just a piece of land. It’s a place where farming and wildlife coexist alongside Dennis and his family. For him, making space for wildlife brings joy, while letting his farm work with, rather than against, nature.

While Dennis always cared about conservation, he used to fear snakes and didn’t like having them on his farm. That changed years ago, he says, at a conservation center. Dennis recalls a conservation officer putting a bull snake in his hands and assuring him the snake wouldn’t bite. “That tactile connection, feeling the weight and movement of the snake, was a defining moment,” he says. He didn’t just stop fearing snakes, he started actively leaving space for them. “We tend to leave our brush piles be,” Dennis says, “and they become home for all kinds of critters.”

Dennis also left a 170-year-old barn in place for vultures, as a nursery. He’s watched them grow from “ugly little chicklings” bouncing around the barn floor to fledglings testing their wings on its roof. While he once worried the big birds might further damage the structure, he found they coexist just fine (it turns out turkey vultures are actually quite light for their size). Other kinds of habitat on the farm – Dennis has about 25 acres of timber, as well as land in the federal Conservation Reserve Program – offer

shelter and food for foxes, coyotes, bobcats, badgers and groundhogs. Dennis says that seeing these animals on the farm is a source of shared joy for him and his daughter.

After his mom died, Dennis found another, more poignant connection. Before her funeral, he says he found himself walking the farm remembering a conversation they once had. “I had told her that if there was a way for her to send a postcard after she was gone, I would be glad of the reassurance, and she had promised she would.”

Later, he was out walking the fence line when he noticed a white bird gliding towards him. The image stopped him. “An all-white bird is not a common sight,” he says. He recalls how the bird didn’t swoop at him. Instead, it flew past him multiple times in a graceful arc. He remembered what his mom used to say – that strange things don’t happen when you’re looking for them, but when they do happen, they might mean something.

In that moment, Dennis couldn’t help wondering if that graceful vision was his mother’s postcard, delivered on bird wings.

(Continued on page 28 →)



Photo courtesy of Dennis McLaughlin

Dennis McLaughlin holds two bulls snakes on his property not long after his experience holding one for the first time.



Bull Snake

Photo by Gary Stolz/USFWS

**“Whenever we can find a way to work in harmony with nature,
as opposed to it, that’s what we are going to do.”**

– Ben Heller

Bats

At Scattergood Friends School and Farm in West Branch, Iowa, biology teacher Ben Heller has been enlisting the help of some wild residents to teach students about nutrient management and how it connects to farming. The private Quaker boarding school has several older barns on its campus that have long been a roosting haven for bats. After considering the best course of action, teachers decided the bats – and specifically, their guano – could be used as part of the curriculum itself.

“Our goal [at Scattergood] is to provide an outdoor learning lab for kids,” Ben says. “Whenever we can find a way to work in harmony with nature, as opposed to it, that’s what we are going to do.” Plus, he adds, “it’s always fun when you get to talk about poop as a professional.”

It was while teaching a class in nutrient management that Ben came up with a novel idea. For one of their final school projects, he assigned a group of students to build guano collection trays. Bat guano is a powerful organic fertilizer, rich in nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. All are key nutrients that improve soil structure, boost plant growth and can enhance crop yields. The guano provides a

sustainable and inexpensive way to support environmentally friendly agriculture. The

idea behind the project was to make it possible for faculty to use the guano later on the school’s organic farm.

The students set to work creating a wooden frame and tray system to place under the barn rafters. Big brown and little brown bats – the two most common bat species in Iowa, and the most likely to roost in old barns – are most active between April and October. During this time, bat guano started collecting in the new tray system. Part 2 of the project came in winter. Teachers, with students watching, spread the guano over the school’s farm fields (which were bare) to help boost soil health – while showing students the process of preparing fallow fields before crops.

While there didn’t end up being much guano, Ben says the hands-on project was still valuable. “It gave the kids a good understanding of the varying sources of nutrient input that can be used around the world.” ■



Ben Heller



Big Brown Bat

Photo by Leah Riley/USFWS



Fields of crops at Scattergood Friends School and Farm in West Branch, Iowa.

Photos courtesy of Ben Heller

Review of Edward H. Faulkner's "Plowman's Folly"

Reviewed by Daryl Obermeyer

In the summer of 1976, a farmer friend and I attended an organic farming workshop in Boy's Town, Nebraska. The main speaker was a French farmer. During his talk, he mentioned the book "Plowman's Folly," published in 1943 by Edward H. Faulkner. That was the first and only time I had heard the book mentioned – until Practical Farmers of Iowa asked for volunteers to review it.

I found "Plowman's Folly" extremely interesting, largely because of my own experience. The book started a little slowly. The first several chapters mainly discussed the author's experience with turning clay subsoil, which made up his yard after digging a basement for his home, into productive soil. He described an interesting experiment that involved digging a trench, filling it with leaves and putting a small amount of soil on top. After giving the organic matter time to rot, the author had a bumper crop of garden produce.

For me, the upshot was seeing how the author turned soil that wouldn't grow a crop even with processed fertilizer into a lush garden. It reminded me of when I was in grade school and my dad planted rye as a cover crop. On the rest of his ground, he applied manure from his cattle, hogs and sheep. That was at a time when the co-ops and some university agriculture departments were promoting synthetic fertilizer instead. I encountered that attitude first-hand. When I was in college, for a summer research project I planted corn in alternating strips of synthetic fertilizer and cattle manure and found no statistical difference in yield. When I turned the paper in, my professor gave me a B-plus and wrote: "It's a good paper. Good research, but manure has no economic value."

When I began farming in southeast Nebraska, it was on poor-quality farm ground thanks to the previous renter. I had to start from scratch rebuilding soil health, and followed the same path as my dad, using cover crops and cattle manure. Much like some folks in the book, my neighbors thought I was doing a lot of work for nothing. But over time, I increased the soil's organic matter from 1% to more than 5%.

"Plowman's Folly," though a bit slow in the first half, validated my own experience. But from about page 99 on, when the author starts focusing on farm yields, I couldn't put the book down. One of Edward's key points was that deep moldboard plowing caused soil degradation, erosion and declining crop

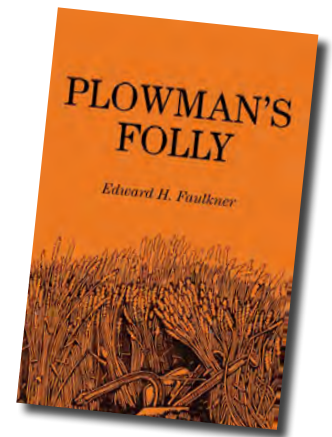
yields. Instead, he advocated using a disc harrow to mix green manures into the soil.

I ended up doing this myself. When most people were still using a moldboard plow, I parked the plow in the hedgerow and used the tandem disc for tillage. By 1983, I was starting to no-till. But I had a landlord who was very opposed to it. He believed soil had to be completely bare for seeds to germinate properly. Another landlord seemed more interested in short-term gain than any long-term benefits of changing the cropping system. Had I been more aware of "Plowman's Folly," I would've handed both landlords a copy to read.

1983 was also the year my wife and I bought our first farm – which let me freely experiment with no-till and cover crops. In the book, Edward describes getting his soil health to where commercial fertilizer wasn't needed. I unfortunately never reached that point. I still apply manure and some commercial fertilizer (though I have reached the point where I no longer need to apply insecticide).

But I have enjoyed my journey to improve soil health. In more recent years, since about 2014, it's taken me to working with Nebraska Extension's On-Farm Research Network, bringing graduate students to my farm and speaking to dozens of organizations about my research. Now that I've read "Plowman's Folly," I wish I'd read it in 1976 when I first heard of it. I'm now 74, and had I done so, I may have been much further along in my own research and in mentoring young farmers who have approached me for advice on cutting expenses on the farm.

I may be late to the book, but I recommend "Plowman's Folly" to every farmer, whether they practice conservation tillage or still plant on bare soil. ■



Daryl Obermeyer raises dryland corn, soybeans and cattle near Brownville, Nebraska, and has been experimenting with conservation practices for more than 50 years. He uses rotational grazing, no-till and cover crops, among other practices, like planting pollinator habitat, and is part of the Nebraska Conservation Mentorship Network.

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.



Hybrid rye growing on our farm at Emmetsburg, Palo Alto County, photographed on July 2, 2025. (Larry Neppl, Pratt Farm, Emmetsburg, Iowa)



Grandfather and grandson working together to get the tractors ready for field work. (MaryAnn Mathis, Cory Family Farm, Elkhart, Iowa)



Twin calves, out exploring the farm together. (Janell Kraayenbrink, DairyBrink LLC, Ames, Iowa)



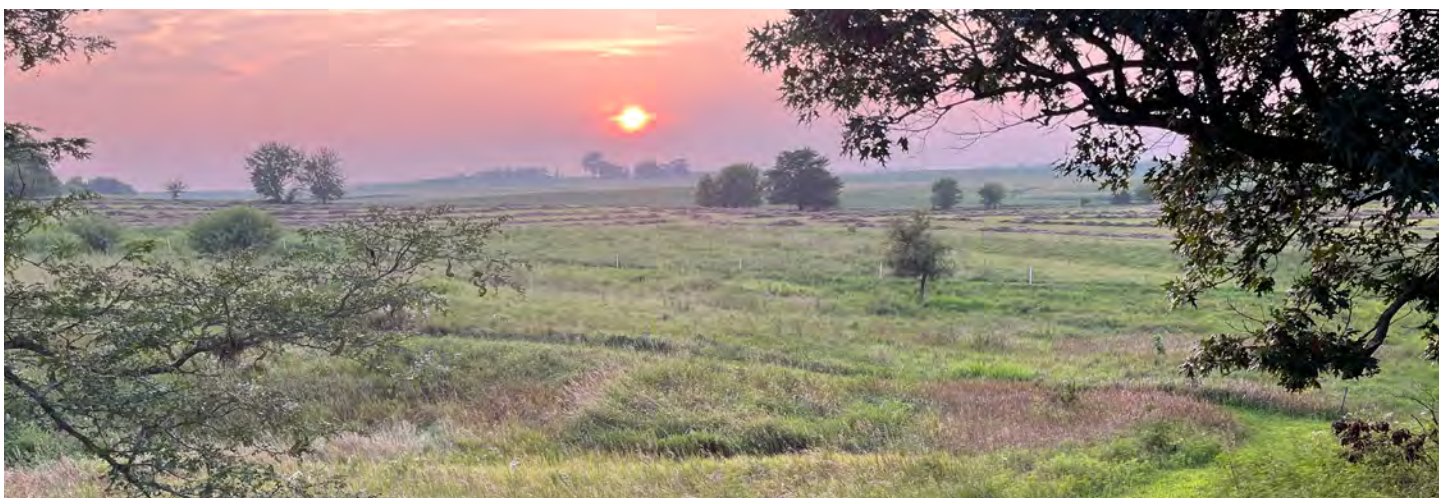
A photo of Cornelian cherries, a delicious red fruit that is a type of dogwood. (Kathy Dice, Red Fern Farm, Wapello, Iowa)



Compared to the adjacent unrestored commodity field, we have no erosion after a 10-inch flash rain event – and production is up. (Ray Meylor, Polk City, Iowa)



Good morning, world! Frost-seeding red clover into winter rye, photographed on March 17, 2026. (Doug Alert, Ash Grove Farm, Hampton, Iowa)



Sunset over our freshly cut and raked pasture. (Brett Buchholz, Prairie Oak Homestead, Ames, Iowa)



An Easter egg hunt in the apple tree nursery. (May Fottral, Plum Creek Orchard, Swisher, Iowa)



I placed a hive trap in an old maple tree in hopes of catching a swarm that was “pesking” a local restaurant. (Arlyn Kauffman, Green Ridge Family Farm, Weldon, 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!

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 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.



Are you curious about what growers and products you'll find in the directory? Lee Matteson, alongside his wife, Kelly, grows vegetables and fruits on their farm, Lee's Greens, near Nevada, Iowa. They recently hosted a PFI field day this season on June 5, showcasing their hydroponically grown leafy greens. You can find more information on Lee's Greens in the directory. ■

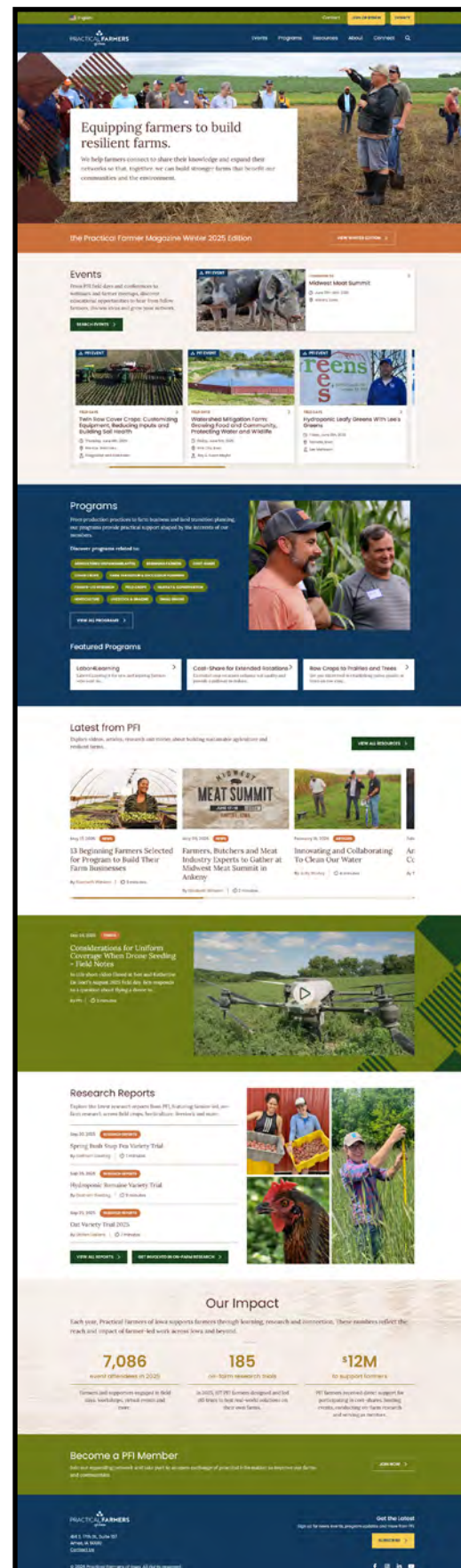
Have You Seen Our New Website?

After more than a year of planning, designing, testing and developing, we launched a new website at the end of April. We partnered with Meyocks, a marketing agency in Des Moines, Iowa, that specializes in working with food and agricultural clients. From the beginning, our goals were to improve user experience and accessibility, and to optimize our content so it readily shows up in search results.

The updated site features a fresh, modern look that better aligns with our current branding, as well as streamlined navigation that makes it easier to find what you need. If you've had a chance to explore the new site, you may have noticed that we reorganized and consolidated content. Our aim was to reduce redundancy and make key resources easier to find.

Enhanced accessibility features further support a more inclusive experience for all visitors. We've also improved mobile functionality so your viewing experience is smooth across various devices. Overall, the new website offers a simpler, more intuitive way to connect with our resources and programming. We're proud of the result and invite you to go to practicalfarmers.org to explore everything it has to offer.

Questions or Feedback? We'd love to hear from you! Contact Emily Yaddof at (515) 232-5661 or emily.yaddof@practicalfarmers.org. ■



Save the Date!

Beginning Farmer Business Workshop

Monday, Aug. 10
Cedar Ridge Distillery | Swisher, IA

This annual event brings beginning farmers together to network, plan and discuss ways to improve their farms while helping to build a sense of community among this fast-growing farming demographic.

Free for everyone to attend.
Registration closes on Aug. 3. Walk-ins are welcome.

For more information and to register, visit
practicalfarmers.org/beginning-farmer-summit.



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 2026 Field Day Guide or visit practicalfarmers.org/events/field-days to see the remaining field days and register to attend. We look forward to seeing you on the farm!

AUGUST

AUG. 7 • Small Grains Shared Learning Call | Noon-1 p.m.
Online | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events)

AUG. 10 • Beginning Farmer Business Workshop
9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. | Swisher, IA | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events)

AUG. 12 • Virtual Cover Crop Workshop | 2-5 p.m.
Online | Free | [Register at practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events)



Find PFI At

JULY

JULY 7 • Rodale Institute Field Day | Marion, IA | [Learn more at rodaleinstitute.org/education/workshops](https://rodaleinstitute.org/education/workshops)

JULY 26 • 2026 SWCS International Annual Conference
St. Louis, MO | [Learn more at swcs.org/26ac](https://swcs.org/26ac)

AUGUST

AUG. 6 • Iowa Women in Ag Conference | Ankeny, IA | [Learn more at iowawomeninag.org/save-the-date](https://iowawomeninag.org/save-the-date)

SEPTEMBER

SEPT. 1-3 • Farm Progress Show | Boone, IA | [Learn more at farmprogressshow.com](https://farmprogressshow.com)

PFI Current Enrollments

From July - September 2026

Grazing Consultations

ROLLING APPLICATION
practicalfarmers.org/livestock-consultations

1-on-1 Land Matching

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

Farm Transition Consultations

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

Cover Crop Cost-Share

STAY TUNED FOR OPEN ENROLLMENT
practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-cost-share

N Rate Risk Protection Program

ENROLLMENT OPENS IN AUGUST 2026
practicalfarmers.org/n-rate-risk-protection-program

Row Crop to Prairies and Trees

ROLLING APPLICATION
practicalfarmers.org/row-crops-to-prairies-and-trees-incentive-payment-program

Precision Conservation Analysis

ROLLING APPLICATION
practicalfarmers.org/precision-conservation-analysis

Petite Prairies

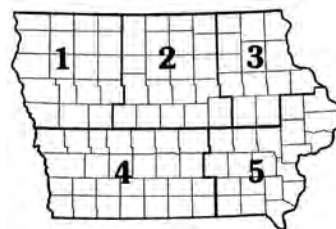
ROLLING APPLICATION
practicalfarmers.org/petite-prairies

Savings Incentive Program

ENROLLMENT OPENS IN AUGUST 2026
practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program

Welcome, New Members!

From Feb. 13 – May 13, 2026



DISTRICT 1 – NORTHWEST

- Randy and Deb Anderson – Cherokee
- Jordan Bird – Sutherland
- Marc Husman – Cherokee
- Derrick Janssen – Manning
- Scott Kent – Osceola

DISTRICT 2 – NORTH CENTRAL

- Christopher Buck – Rhodes
- Jeff Divan – Thompson
- Bob Johnson – Ames
- Jett Neuberger – Clear Lake
- Kristin Roach – Ames
- Ann and Linn Wilbur – Nevada

DISTRICT 3 – NORTHEAST

- Jake Falck – Lamont
- Ben Gibson – Elgin
- Royce Rottinghaus – Jesup
- Hunter and Rachel Vontalge – Manchester

DISTRICT 4 – SOUTHWEST

- Gabe Arkfeld – Defiance
- Brody Barrier – Neola

- Andrew Bexton – Garden Grove
- Benjamin Borntrager – Seymour
- Steven Dearden – Weldon
- Paul Ferguson – Van Meter
- Gopi Goteti – Waukee
- Kenneth Gregersen – Ankeny
- Aaron McCurdy – Massena
- Nick and Brooke Seyler – Nodaway
- Kyle Thompson – Macksburg

DISTRICT 5 – SOUTHEAST

- Christopher Bone – Monticello
- Braxton Brand – Searsboro
- Ura Gingerich – Harper
- Liam Johnston – Burlington
- Joan Maxwell – Donahue
- Ruth McAndrews – Davenport
- Scott Whitmore – Oxford
- Bart Zuber – Marengo

DISTRICT 6 – OUT OF STATE

- Linda Dufresne – Orange Park, FL
- Jeffrey Duncan – Alexis, IL
- Isaac and Allyson Hebert – Arlington, IL

- Kraig Hofstatter – Lowpoint, IL
- Darrin Johnston – Washington, IL
- Tim Leman – Secor, IL
- Nathan Mammosser – Erie, IL
- Dylan McCurdy – Rushville, IL
- Brian Randall – Gladstone, IL
- Mike Rice – O'Fallon, IL
- Ryan Sharpe – Carthage, IL
- Patti Smith – Macomb, IL
- Bill Wyffels – Geneseo, IL
- Gary Palmer – Fort Scott, KS
- Bill Spiegel – Manhattan, KS
- James Domnick – Morris, MN
- Bradley Holland – Buffalo, MN
- Dan Sheild – Shafer, MN
- Chad Fisher – Chillicothe, MO
- Michael Hicks – Knox City, MO
- Brian Randall – Waukesha, WI
- Chris Zignego – Hartford, WI

Thank you

to our newest lifetime members!

**Andrew & Sarah
Orngard**
Pilot Mound, IA

**Katie & William
Rock**
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/membership-options.

PRACTICAL FARMERS *of Iowa*

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Investing in More

Shanen Ebersole pulls the netting off a hay bale as the cattle wait for it to be unrolled on her farm near Kellerton, Iowa. Read on page 10 about how Shanen invested in herself through education, and in turn, invested in her business.