

the PRACTICAL FARMER

AUTUMN 2026



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Field day attendees parade through Mike DeCook's grasslands near Lovilia, Iowa, to learn how he is creating a welcoming habitat for grassland birds through grazing cattle. Read more about his practices on page 28.

CORRECTION

In the "PFI Leaders" section of our Summer 2026 issue, we incorrectly referred to Rich Pirog as a former PFI interim executive director. He was actually a former PFI interim associate director.



ON THE COVER:

Kernza, a perennial grain developed from intermediate wheatgrass, waves in the warm breeze. Caleb Akin and Noah Wendt hosted a field day near Cambridge, Iowa, on July 21 where they discussed their organic Kernza crop, sunflowers grown for oil production and food-grade oats. Turn to page 20 to see more images from 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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Several PFI staff members are involved with producing PFI's quarterly magazine.

To see the complete list of PFI staff, including contact details, visit practicalfarmers.org/staff.

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Thank you to the organizations and agencies who provide funding for our magazine:

- Builders Vision Philanthropy
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, with support from NRCS, Cargill, Inc, and Nestle USA. Award number 2004.24.081651
- U.S. Department of Agriculture under agreement number NR226114XXXG004
- U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through grant SCBP24000621
- Vere Initiatives

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The Magic of Community

Summer at PFI means field days – and plenty of opportunities to connect. On the way to my first field day of the season, at Miss Effie's Flower Farm, my colleagues Debra Boekholder, Ashly Senske and I reflected on how these gatherings offer a welcome counterbalance to the endless stream of polarizing news.

Field days are rooted in practical solutions and shaped by farmers' experiences and perspectives. They bring people together around shared interests and goals, creating space to learn from one another and celebrate common ground rather than focus on our differences.

Creating Community for People

Miss Effie's Flower Farm, owned and operated by Cathy Linker Lafrenz, is a small-acreage flower farm near Donahue, Iowa, with a mission that extends far beyond growing flowers. Cathy's passion for building community is unmistakable. She welcomes guests with enthusiasm, warm hugs and genuine excitement.

Community is at the heart of everything Cathy does. One of the farm's signature attractions is its you-pick flower experience, designed to make flower harvesting accessible and enjoyable. "For the best blooms in the world, I'm not the model," Cathy says. "My farm is for the experience." Experiences abound at Miss Effie's, from areas for visitors to relax in the beauty of rural Iowa to prime opportunities for photo shoots.

Cathy believes the appeal lies not just with the flowers but in the setting and atmosphere. "Build cute," she recommends. Cathy recently started a weekly on-farm "Farmers" market featuring women vendors. Cathy is working to build a welcoming environment by adding vendors and bringing in a food truck.

I can't imagine a better field day to kick off the season. I left feeling inspired, hopeful and deeply grateful to be part of a community connected by shared interests, values and a love for rural Iowa.

Creating Community for Wildlife

My second field day of this season, at DeCook Ranch near Lovilia, Iowa, was quite a contrast. Ranchers Mike DeCook and his sons, Josh and Wyatt, are also building community – but of a different kind. The DeCooks have put endless hours into transforming the land base from largely row crops to a lush habitat for grassland birds. They have permanently protected more than 2,700 acres of farmland across three counties through the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

Mike says he's working to rewild his farm. For him, this means restoring ecological practices, increasing native species diversity and removing invasive species. On one native prairie remnant that used to be overrun by honeysuckle and autumn locust,



Mike DeCook (center) and his two sons, Josh (left) and Wyatt (right), hosted a field day on their farm near Lovilia, Iowa, on June 23.

there are now 170 species of identified natives. Mike says the plant diversity is akin to medicine for the livestock that graze his land.

The DeCooks also seek to remove human-made structures, a practice they call "undevelopment." They use temporary fencing and don't have outbuildings. To foster habitat for more bird species, Mike ensures there's always a mix of grass heights, from short to tall. He also refuses to bale hay before Aug. 1 to preserve bird habitat.

The result of all this work, for the visitor, is an awe-inspiring glimpse of the wildness Iowa once was and could be again. But Mike is still running a farm business, and his commitment to diversity and creating a wildlife community is good for his bottom line. "The more wild and perennial we get, the more our economic profits go up," Mike says. "We have low overhead and input costs."

I left this field day with hope that dedicated people are working to bring diversity back to this wonderful, fertile state.

The Magic of a Diverse Network

I love that each PFI field day is different, based on the farmer's personality, experiences and interests. I'm grateful that I have the privilege of being able to attend field days every summer. I've left each one learning something, connecting with new people and feeling that there is hope for our farms and communities. There are field days left this year! Please attend; you won't regret it.

Need more inspiration? Learn more about Mike DeCook's farm goals later in this edition. Then read how Noreen Thomas is using her farm to create community for people, and how Kyle Nilsestuen is using cover crops to create community for wildlife.

Thank you to all PFI members who are creating community for all creatures big and small in your unique ways.

To community,

Sally Worley

Giving and Growing

By Terri Mork Speirs

What Does Legacy Mean To You?

This past spring, I had the opportunity to visit Blue Gate Farm, operated by Jill Beebout and Sean Skeehan. The farm is located in Chariton, Iowa, on land owned by the Beebout family for generations. I was privileged to tag along on a video shoot about Jill's winter greens. (See PFI's YouTube video: "Cold-Season Greens Taste Better: Practical Tips for Growing Winter Greens in High Tunnels.")

The main purpose of the visit was to document and share Jill's knowledge about growing fresh produce during Iowa's most frigid weather. While on tape, she answered questions about weather, crop varieties, irrigation, high tunnel temperatures and more. When it came my turn to chat with Jill on camera, I had different a kind of question – "What does legacy mean to you?" – and I was grateful for the chance to ask it.

Jill responded as if she'd thought about it a lot. Her answer was decisive. "If I step out of my door, I can see the place where my dad was born," she said. "And if I look at a distance across the field at night, I can see the lights of the farm where my grandfather was born."

I asked her this question because Jill and Sean are members of PFI's Legacy Society. Members of this group have included a gift to PFI in their estate planning by naming PFI as a beneficiary in their life insurance policy. For Jill, legacy seems to involve honoring the past by stewarding the present and giving to the future.

"I remember seeing my dad and my grandfather planting thousands and thousands of trees," Jill said. "Those were for future generations and that was their investment into the land and the improvements."

On behalf of future generations who will benefit by our ongoing mission of farm and community resilience – thank you.

See Jill's video about legacy here:
bit.ly/pfilegacy. ■



Sean Skeehan and Jill Beebout

Practical Farmers of Iowa's Legacy Society

Thank you to those who have included PFI in your estate planning and/or land transfer planning. This generosity will ensure that our shared mission of farm and community resilience grows into the future. The following list is current as of July 13, 2026.

PFI's Legacy Society Members

Claire Andreason	Ruth Rabinowitz
Anonymous (2)	Ann Robinson
Steve Beaumont*	Jill Beebout and Sean Skeehan
Kelsie Eckhart	Terri Mork Speirs and Robert Speirs
Joan Fumetti	Angie and Kelly Tagtow
Helen Gunderson	Anne Marie Topp*
Gary and Nancy Guthrie	Ruth Schoeneman*
Diane Horn	Sally Worley
Larry and Ruth Neppel	Wendell Zimmerman
Tom and Ruth* Neuberger	
Rich and Lori Pirog	

Farmland Donation

Anonymous (2)	John and Angela Tedesco*
Diane Horn	

* deceased
+ realized

Giving and Growing is a section of the Practical Farmer magazine where we spotlight our donors. We are grateful for a broad base of supporters from both on and off the farm, individuals who deeply care about our shared mission of farm and community resilience.

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

Revisiting Broiler Breeds for Pasture Production

By Emma Link

One of my favorite things about Cooperators' Program research is that it's iterative. In many cases, trials are repeated year after year, with farmers adjusting treatments in response to previous results. Sometimes, though, it takes a decade or more for farmers to revisit a question.

In fall 2024, farmers Anna and Shae Pesek, of Coggon, Iowa, identified a problem with their pastured broiler enterprise. The Cornish Cross chickens they were raising had high rates of deep pectoral myopathy, a degenerative muscle disease that causes necrosis and atrophy in the breast muscle. DPM is linked to wing flapping in modern, fast-growing broiler breeds like the Cornish Cross. But encouraging movement is one of the goals of Anna and Shae's pasture-based system. To address the issue, they compared Cornish Crosses with White Rangers, a slower-growing breed they hoped would have lower rates of DPM while maintaining acceptable growth.

While doing background research for Anna and Shae's trial, I discovered they were not the first PFI farmers to test alternatives to Cornish Crosses in pasture systems. In 2010, farmers Dana Foster, Rob and Tammy Faux and Tim Daley compared Cornish Crosses to Freedom Rangers because they were dissatisfied with how little the Cornish Crosses foraged.

They found that Freedom Rangers grew more slowly but foraged better, making them a good option for farms willing to accept either a longer growing period or smaller birds.

In September 2025, Anna and Shae sent their final batch of White Rangers and Cornish Crosses to the processor. The White Rangers had significantly less DPM than the Cornish Crosses – 10% compared to 25%. Anna and Shae concluded that they remain interested in switching to White Rangers but need to conduct another trial to understand the financial implications of switching breeds.

Although Anna and Shae did not repeat the trial in 2026, five other farmers have taken up the question on their own farms. This year, they are tracking feed costs and hanging weights to better understand the economics of slower-growing ranger breeds. While results are still pending, several farmers report that their rangers are more active on pasture and spend more time foraging than Cornish Crosses. "So far, we love the Red Rangers!" writes Melanie Hundling of Breda, Iowa.

Whatever these farmers find, it seems likely that a question first explored in 2010 will continue evolving as farmers build on one another's experiences and adapt the results to their own operations. ■



Anna and Shae Pesek's pastured chicken setup (left) on their farm in Coggon, Iowa. Anna and Shae continued to find deep pectoral myopathy (shown in the photo as bruising on the wing of the middle bird) in both Cornish Crosses and White Rangers that were processed during the heat of late summer (right).

Any PFI member is welcome to join the Cooperators' Program and trial (or retrieval) a practice on their farm. If you'd like to get 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."



Survey Says...

Our 2026 member survey is a goldmine of insight into our members' wants and needs

By Emma Liddle

This past winter, over 1,300 households from Practical Farmers' membership completed our 2026 member survey. Thank you to everyone who took part!

We send this survey once every three years to gather feedback from our full membership. What we receive helps us analyze our work over the previous three years, identify present priorities and build our programming for our members' future goals over the short- and long-term.

This survey data, along with the strategic listening sessions we held in the spring, will inform our 2027-2029 strategic plan. Even though we halved the length of the member survey, we collected a massive amount of valuable data.

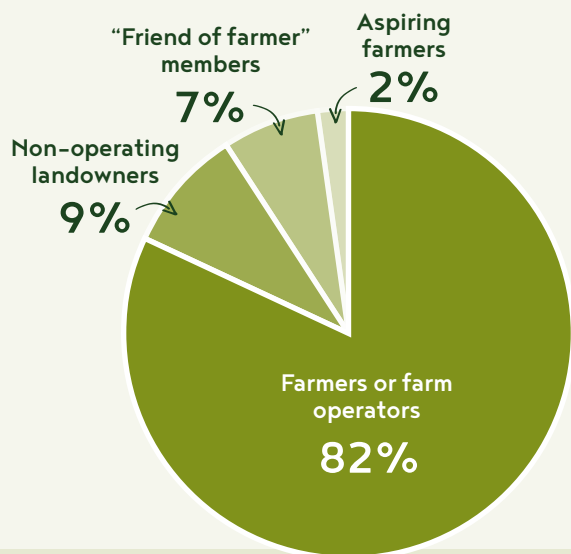
The following are some snapshots of what we learned. While they don't reflect the full breadth of what we gathered – and what we'll be digging into further over the coming weeks and months – they provide some helpful insights into who our members are, what matters to you and what PFI can do to help.

Who Are Our Members?



The **1,300-plus** households that completed the member survey represent **30%** of PFI's overall membership.

How Do Members Define Themselves?



Of those farming currently, 20% are beginning farmers (those with one to 10 years of experience).

What Do Members Raise?

Of the 1,200 respondents who were farmers and/or landowners

58% had field crops enterprises
42% had livestock enterprises
11% had horticulture enterprises

Top Enterprises

Corn, soybeans, beef cattle, hay, small grains, custom work, swine, annual fruits and vegetables



How Is PFI Doing at Serving Your Needs?

In this version of the member survey, we asked a few questions centered around how PFI staff are serving the needs of our members. As our big tent grows ever bigger, we need to scale our programs intentionally to serve farmers and those around them.

Since the last survey...



Our staff grew from 34 to 58 personnel ▶ *a 70% jump*

Our membership grew from around 6,300 to nearly 10,000 ▶ *a 60% jump*

This growth has meant many new faces among both staff and members. When asked on the survey, “Through my association with PFI, I feel like PFI staff know me,” 56% agreed or strongly agreed. The response reflects a balance PFI needs to strike between continuing to grow and help more farmers and making our current membership feel seen, heard and helped.

Despite this rapid growth, the survey data shows that PFI staff are making members feel acknowledged:

Over 90% of members agree or strongly agree that when they reach out to PFI:



The information staff provide is accurate



They feel satisfied with the service they receive



Their inquiry is welcome

Perception of PFI as an organization is equally important and strong:



94% of respondents agree or strongly agree that PFI is a good steward of farmer data



96% agree or strong agree that PFI staff are professional

Empowering Farmers + Community

Of those who responded to the member survey:

75%

agree or strongly agree that they feel a sense of community through their association with PFI

66%

agree or strongly agree that they could help make a difference in their local communities

80%

feel they can make a difference to bigger landscape issues, like water quality, through their association with PFI



(Continued on page 10 →)

Where Should PFI Place the Most Emphasis?

This year, our most vital question for steering PFI's priorities came in open-ended form. The survey included three text boxes for respondents to list what was most important to them. We then combed through these answers and identified three thematic groups and one throughline:

It's not enough to know what to change.

PFI should provide the enabling conditions to make change doable.

Theme 1



Cover Crops | Water Quality | Nitrate Loss | Erosion Control | Soil Health

Helping farmers implement sustainable practices was the most repeated theme.

Cover Crops

PFI should:

Continue to help farmers adopt, establish and get the most out of cover crops for their operation.

Address the real-world barriers to using cover crops – like cost, timing, termination, species choice and yield impacts.

Water Quality + Soil Health

Members want to use conservation practices to:

Control soil and nitrate runoff

Prevent erosion (wind and water)

Build organic matter and soil biology

Improve long-term resilience

Challenges

The positive effects of regenerative practices can be costly, and in some cases, can take years to be tangible. PFI's cost-share programs for these practices are designed to help by giving members the breathing room to try new things.

Theme 2



Diversifying Beyond Corn and Soybeans | Livestock and Grazing | Horticulture and Local Food Systems

Diversifying

This theme underlined how PFI must keep focusing on helping farmers diversify their farms:

Small grains

Perennials

Agroforestry

Respondents also stressed the importance of fruit and vegetable growers in the state, and having local markets for these products.

Bringing Livestock Back to the Land

Members expressed the importance of livestock in a resilient agricultural landscape via:

Grazing cover crops

Pasture-based systems

Rotational grazing

Integrating animals into row crops

Challenges

Lack of markets for new products
Prohibitive prices
Crop timing

Theme 3



Education | Peer Learning | Community-Building

The third broad theme speaks to PFI's bread-and-butter work: farmer-to-farmer learning. Respondents were clear that PFI's on-farm events, annual conference, peer learning, mentorship and more are necessary.

PFI members also continue to emphasize the need to support beginning farmers, land access, farm transition and those seeking help with landowner-tenant dynamics.



Questions? Feedback?

If you have questions about any of the member survey data – or you have other thoughts to share – we welcome your feedback anytime. Contact Steve Carlson, membership manager, at steve.carlson@practicalfarmers.org.



2027 Annual Conference

Jan. 8-9, 2027

**Preconference Short Courses: Jan. 7
Iowa Events Center | Des Moines, IA**

Join us for three days of learning, sharing knowledge and building connections to foster resilient farms and communities.

Highlights include:

- 70+ sessions featuring over 100 speakers
 - Over 90 sponsors and exhibitors
 - Preconference short courses
 - Storytelling
 - PFI supper and cocktails
- and more!*

Registration opens October 14

Learn more by visiting our website below
or by scanning the QR code.

bit.ly/pfiac27



Cover Crops *for Wildlife*



While cover crops are often heralded for their agronomic and soil benefits, they can support a surprising array of wildlife too.

By Vanya North

Kyle Nilsestuen was glad of the tree-covered slopes that blocked the bitter December wind as he made his way across his fields, eyes scanning for turkeys.

It was on this hunting trip that Kyle witnessed a remarkable sight. Over the course of just a few hours, 18 bucks sauntered into the field, lured by the food and warmth provided by the cover crops Kyle had planted earlier in the fall.

“Most of them were up and coming, but there were a couple of lifetime bucks,” Kyle says. “For hours, I watched them eat and relax. They particularly liked the turnips and brassica. All day, they would lay down, ruminate, get up, eat and lay down again. It really was something to watch – and they were there because of the cover crops.”

Kyle is a fifth-generation farmer in the Driftless Area of western Wisconsin. The farm has been in his family since 1863 and was once a longtime dairy operation. Kyle himself majored in dairy science with a preveterinary focus. But he moved away from dairy in 2011 after realizing dairy was not the path for him. Over the course of the next several years, Kyle transitioned to a beef cow-calf and row crop operation. Today, Kyle owns and operates 325 acres along with farming another couple of hundred rented acres. The total operation consists of corn, wheat and soybeans, as well as pasture and woodland.

Farming in the Driftless Region often means farming with steep slopes prone to erosion during heavy rain. No-till has become a necessity for Kyle after transitioning to row crops. In 2020, to combat erosion, Kyle began incorporating cover crops into his rotation. Since then, he has seen firsthand the benefits of cover crops through the variety of wildlife calling his farm home.

Cover crops can provide valuable habitat and food resources for wildlife during times of the year when crop fields might otherwise be bare. The added vegetation offers shelter for insects, birds and small mammals, while flowering species like clovers can provide pollen and nectar for beneficial insects. Cover crops also support a wide range of soil-dwelling macroinvertebrates, such as earthworms, which serve as a food

source for wildlife higher up the food chain, by increasing soil health overall.

Although most farmers plant cover crops for both agronomic and economic reasons, the practice can create a more wildlife-friendly agricultural landscape by increasing habitat diversity and extending living plant cover beyond the growing season.

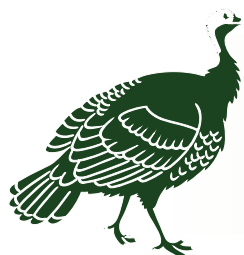
Kyle's Approach to Cover Crops and Supporting Farm and Wildlife

With his cover crops, Kyle practices sequential termination. With this approach, he lets legumes and brassicas overwinter before corn, which creates constant fall and winter forage. Kyle has noticed that turkeys are particularly fond of the cover crops. “We are inundated with turkey,” he says. “They’ve been overwintering on the farm, digging through the snow-covered cover cropped fields.”

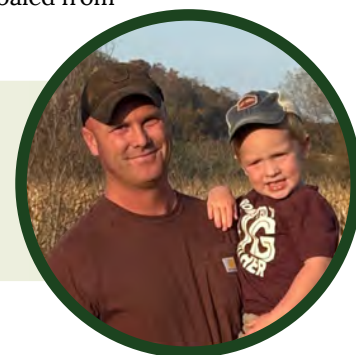
The abundance of turkeys and deer on his farm has opened up opportunities for Kyle. During hunting seasons, he allows permitted hunting on his land, which provides an unconventional income source. Outside of hunting, Kyle’s cover crops have been an invitation to other wildlife. The farm now hosts both barred and Eastern screech owls. “We have great owl habitat, which tells me that I have rodents – which tells me that I have other unseen things happening on the land, which is good. It’s a good base for a functional ecosystem.”

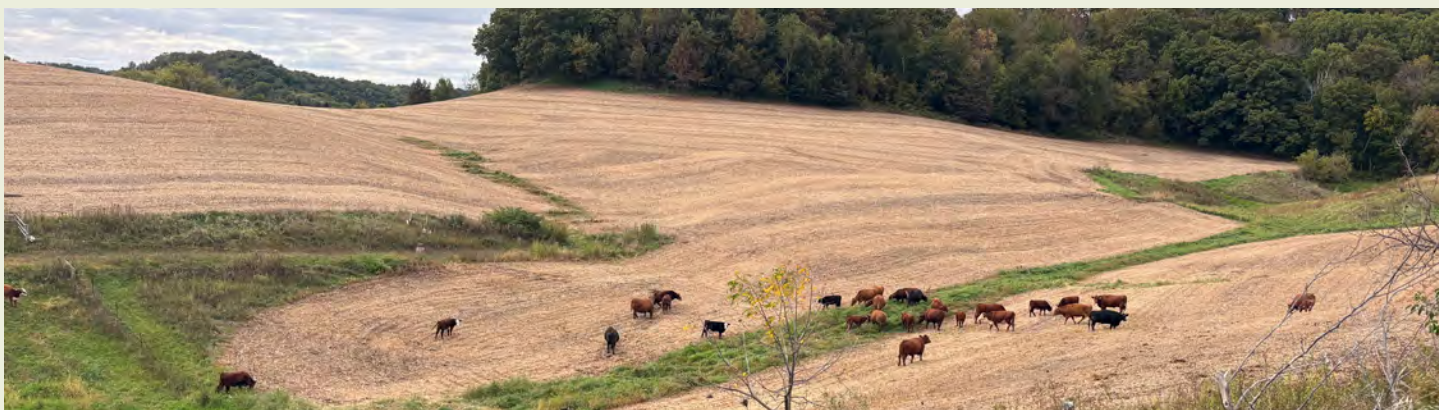
Kyle feeds his livestock in the winter with cornstalks and supplements with weekly high-quality hay bales to add some protein to the cattle’s diet. Kyle suspects that helps lure some of the rodents that then attract larger birds of prey, such as hawks and owls.

According to the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, legume-heavy hays, like the ones baled from Kyle’s clover cover crops, provide



For farmers who want to enhance wildlife benefits with their cover crops, Kyle recommends using a diverse mixture that includes brassicas and clovers after wheat or other small grains. These high-energy mixes support deer, turkey and songbirds.





Farming in the Driftless Region means dealing with steep slopes (*top left*) and high erosion. Kyle's farm sits in this hilly part of western Wisconsin; cover crops (*top right*) help keep his soil in place. He grazes cattle on the cover crops, often rotating them around the rugged landscape. *All photos courtesy of Kyle Nilsestuen.*

critical protein not only for cattle, but for deer and other wildlife. The higher protein content provides a sustained and slow-release energy source that's crucial for helping wildlife maintain body heat in winter. Feeding hay also affects the broader ecosystem. When cattle trample hay, along with their manure, into the ground, they're helping feed nutrients back into the soil. Since incorporating cover crops, Kyle has noticed an increase in organic matter and soil coverage on his land.

Planting for Wildlife

For farmers who want to enhance wildlife benefits with their cover crops, Kyle recommends using a diverse mixture that includes brassicas and clovers after wheat or other small grains. These high-energy mixes support deer, turkey and songbirds. One way to start incorporating these mixtures is by expanding existing grass waterways. One of Kyle's neighbors has done just that. "By spreading his waterways with rye, instead of having a 15-to-20-foot grass waterway, there's another 30, 40, 50 feet of rye on each side that gets terminated each year, but that extra bit of catch has made a big difference in places," Kyle explains.

For Kyle, adding cover crops has unlocked benefits that span multiple spheres. They've been a boon to the hunting he enjoys on his land while helping him diversify his income. The cover crops also provide vital ecological benefits that support a cascade of wildlife. The mutual benefits illustrate how working land can support farmers economically while helping sustain the environment.

Incorporating cover crops is part of a longer goal for Kyle. He is turning toward a future goal of moving out of row crops entirely. His aim is to establish a fully grass-based grazing system for his cattle that continues to support the same wildlife his cover crops currently do.

"I really hope we can be just a cow-calf operation in the future. I enjoy the quiet times when I'm not in a tractor," Kyle says. "I want to incorporate regenerative grazing for not only better soil health, but more robust bird populations and our key hunting species like turkey and white-tailed deer."

He adds that seeing how his farming practices are helping those other species thrive on his land "gives me a value to the conservation practices that I might not be able to put a financial amount to." ■

Sowing Seeds, Weaving Community

Noreen Thomas is growing community around local foods through creativity and a focus on reciprocity

By Solveig Orngard

Turning onto Main Street in the small town of Hendrum, Minnesota, during the noon hour in early June, it's quiet aside from a steady wind and the music playing in the local tavern. American flags are neatly mounted on the iconic black lampposts. Despite the quiet, cars line the street. One of them belongs to Noreen Thomas, who has just arrived to deliver ground beef to the local food pantry.

Noreen – a farmer and local-food advocate from Doubting Thomas Farms, located near Moorhead, Minnesota, 17 miles to the south – is a consistent contributor to the pantry. “It’s rural, so they don’t get support like in a bigger city. They realized that their lifeline is the local people,” she says. “I think we gave about \$1,500 worth of grain and flour, seven-grain cereal, rolled oats and pearled barley through a local food assistance program.”



Noreen Thomas heads to inspect the perennial sunflowers that are part of a study with the USDA's Agricultural Research Service on her farm near Moorhead, Minnesota.

Noreen and her husband Lee, a fifth-generation farmer, have been growing certified organic oats, barley, wheat, corn, blue corn, soybeans and more since 1997. Much of their grain sells to restaurants in the greater Fargo-Moorhead area.

But some of it ends up in Hendrum, used by the local tavern or shared through the food pantry. Formerly run by another organization, the food pantry had been at the brink of closing before a group of motivated townspeople banded together to keep it alive. They created a nonprofit, Hometown HOPE (Helping Others Provide Enrichment), to run the food pantry out of the Hendrum community building. The organization also kept the thrift store, located next door to the pantry, from closing.

Noreen finds Kristi Beyl, director of the nonprofit, chatting with employees in the thrift store as several new shoppers enter. Together, Noreen and Kristi go out and gather the ground beef from Noreen's car and bring it into the food pantry where boxed goods line the shelves and many dozens of eggs are stacked in the fridge awaiting the next pantry opening in two days.

Once all the beef is tucked into the freezer, they head back out and admire a row of large containers filled with flowers, tomatoes and other plants – a project they recently led with the local Girl Scouts and 4-H club to green up an otherwise unused nook. Walking across the street to Maggie's Hometown Tavern, Kristi and Noreen run into multiple townspeople, each happy to pause and chat for a time.

"It's like a different world [in Hendrum]," Noreen says. "They help each other. They all are collective thinkers. And when we're there, people are curious why we're there and stop by."

Though not from Hendrum (she grew up in Montana), Noreen has woven herself into the folds of this small community.

With a population of less than 300 and no grocery store, Noreen likes to know that her nutrient-dense whole-grain products are still nourishing the local community. But that begs a question: If Doubting Thomas Farms grows grains, why is she bringing beef to the food pantry?

For Noreen, the answer is simple: her desire to support local-food access in Hendrum. The local 4-H club had recently raised money through a fundraiser and chose to use the funds to buy meat for the pantry. Noreen stepped in to help, picking up the ground beef from her tenant farmer.

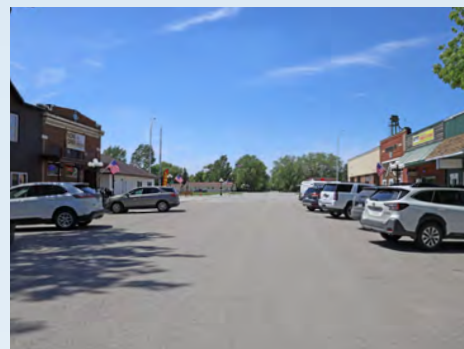
Sharing Space

One of Noreen's keys to building community is reciprocity. Often, this involves opening her farm to the community. She welcomes people onto her farm for a host of reasons, from studying perennial sunflowers to foraging for wild edible plants to attending educational classes she hosts. In those instances, Noreen shares her land and knowledge while delighting in the positive impact of those partnerships.

One example is her ongoing youth programming. For several years, Doubting Thomas Farms has hosted educational programs for local Indigenous youth through the growing season. The students learn about foraging, gardening and cooking. Together, they sow and save Indigenous seed varieties for their families as well as for White Earth Nation. Last year, with Noreen's help, they planted a Four Sisters plot featuring the traditional Three Sisters of corn, beans and squash plus sunflowers, one of several other crops many Native communities include with the triad.

Noreen doesn't do this work alone, though. "People in the community have been over-the-top supportive of things," she says. "I'll ask for boots for the kids because it rains a lot, and boxes and

(Continued on page 16 →)



"I think there has to be a return of more togetherness [in agriculture]."

- Noreen Thomas



From top to bottom: Main Street at midday in Hendrum, Minnesota. Kristi Beyl shows off the ground beef that will feed community members through Hometown HOPE's food pantry in Hendrum, Minnesota. Noreen proudly displays three Doubting Thomas Farms grain products: oat berries, oatmeal and seven-grain cereal.

boxes show up. I think that's because I'm not asking for me, I'm asking for them."

She has also had help from local Indigenous leaders like Candace Stock. Candace is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and grew up on the White Earth Reservation. She is executive chef for Salt & Scoria at the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in Medora, North Dakota. For the youth program and other events at Doubting Thomas Farms, Candace teaches cooking demonstrations and leads foraging walks. Reciprocally, she purchases Noreen's grains for her restaurant.

Mentoring Others

For Noreen, these efforts and partnerships all stem from her desire to increase access to diverse, nutritious and locally grown foods. She first came to the farm with a Bachelor of Science in food and nutrition and no previous row crop farming experience. But she jumped in, learning how to use equipment, keep records and find markets. After years of learning – and lacking a mentor of her own – she is now using her experience to mentor and help beginning and non-traditional farmers as a peer connector with Renewing the Countryside.

For example, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture opened enrollment in June for the Assistance for Specialty Crop Farmers program, which offered over \$1.6 billion in payments to specialty crop farms that hadn't been covered through an earlier program, Noreen immediately got to work "calling the bean growers, the potato growers, the hazelnut farmers that I know." She wanted those farmers to know about the opportunity before the application window closed on Aug. 7. And with each call, Noreen offered to help with paperwork, especially for those who don't have strong English skills yet.

It's not that she wants to spare these farmers from making any mistakes. It's the mistakes, she says, that have guided her own path to the many successes she can appreciate today. Rather, Noreen wants to help these farmers navigate the initial barriers – the bureaucratic hurdles that might prevent them from having the sorts of creative mistakes that lead farmers to expand their knowledge.

"Each mistake is a learning curve," Noreen says. "Some of the best things that have happened to me were mistakes where I pivoted." Instead of seeing those experiences negatively, Noreen says she reframes them as creativity.

Sowing Seeds of Connection

Driving back to the farm from Hendrum after a filling lunch with Kristi at the tavern, Noreen reflects on the value of marketing clubs of the 1980s when farmers collectively decided on grain prices. She wonders how farmers could better cooperate to accomplish goals today. "I think there has to be a return of more togetherness [in agriculture]. I'll let some people use equipment, or we'll share seed or buy fuel together."

For Noreen, trading with neighbors builds that reciprocity and trust in her community. After grain harvest, for example, Doubting Thomas Farms gives any chaff and poorer-quality grain to a neighbor farmer to feed his cattle. In return, he gives Noreen beef. She has similar partnerships with other farmers, some raising pork or chicken to trade instead of beef.

"There are some people that I exist with in a very circular, non-currency environment," Noreen says. "Some people really get it. I say to them, 'Hey, I'll give you some grain, and when your beef is ready, then let's trade.' We both come away really happy."

Even as Noreen weaves the fabric of community through her many partnerships and projects, she is constantly using her creativity to envision new possibilities. "I always have seeds in my pocket," she says, "and usually rolling around in my purse."

For Noreen, each new relationship, each mistake and every challenge, is a seed she will soon sow to further nourish the communities she has found and fostered. ■

Note: Since the writing of this article, Noreen applied for funding through Minnesota's Farm to Food Security Grant. Hendrum's food pantry was recently granted \$30,000 thanks to Noreen's efforts and grant writing experience.



Doubting Thomas Farms near Moorhead, Minnesota. The field in the foreground awaits planting as part of the youth programs she hosts on the farm.

From Local Farms

to the Harvestville Table



In rural Donnellson, the Hohl family's farm-to-table dinners connect local farmers, chefs and the community in support of the local food system.

By Ashly Senske



Julie Hohl and Ashley Phillips

It's mid-May and rain clouds gather in the distance behind a red barn.

Inside, candles are lit on tables and the crew at Harvestville Farm is buzzing as guests begin to arrive for one of their much sought-after farm-to-table dinners. In a kitchen just behind the barn, which also serves as a cafe for Harvestville, Chef Ashley Phillips is prepping the first course with her team.

Located in Donnellson, Iowa – a town of under a thousand – Harvestville Farm is run by Adam and Julie Hohl. The farm itself focuses predominantly on pumpkins, which began as Adam's high school FFA project, and other seasonal produce. Adam's brother-in-law, Blake Conlee, manages the more traditional side of the Hohl family farm, including cattle and about 200 acres of row crops. Adam and Julie's kids are the fifth generation to be part of the farm.

Kathy Hohl, Adam's mother, is proud of how her family has maintained more traditional Iowa farming practices while also expanding and innovating, bringing new life to the farm. She believes their ability to successfully diversify shows what can be possible in rural Iowa.

The current iteration of Harvestville Farm started in 2004 when Adam and Julie opened their doors on weekends in the fall for their pumpkin patch. At the time, they commuted each weekend from St. Louis. Since then, they've moved back to the area and have expanded to include events throughout the year, a cafe with a full lunch menu and a shop that's open in the winter featuring local products and seasonal items. "We're just constantly reinventing ourselves and being creative," Julie says.

(Continued on page 18 →)

Creating a Network and an Experience

One way they've creatively reinvented themselves is with their farm-to-table dinners. Adam and Julie launched them in 2011 to connect their community with local producers. They also wanted to offer unique experiences that would draw people to their rural business. Since starting the dinners, the events have become hugely popular. The 2026 season sold out in just a few minutes after online registration opened in early March. Some guests booked a table or seat at multiple dinners throughout the summer.

Farm-to-table dinners typically focus on in-season, locally grown produce. The goal of these events is to strengthen relationships with nearby farmers, and to connect guests to local food systems. At the start, the Hohls organized just a few dinners a year. They hadn't yet built relationships with regional chefs, so they worked with the Culinary Arts program at Indian Hills Community College in Ottumwa.

Since then, they've expanded considerably, offering more dinners crafted by a growing list of top chefs in the region. This season, for instance, Adam and Julie are offering 14 dinners from April to September featuring 12 chefs. Now that they've built these chef relationships, the whole enterprise has developed a kind of rhythm. But when they first decided to expand their dinner offerings, Julie says it was hard to find chefs to work with.

First, it was hard to convince a chef to take time off to come to the southeast corner of the state. Many of those chefs also work full-time jobs at restaurants, adding logistical challenges. "So we kind of geared more towards private chefs," Julie explains, "then just started developing really good relationships with some of them and it's just blossomed from there."

It's important to the Hohls that any chef they partner with "believes in growing and using local products, believes in the farm-to-table movement and doesn't use the term loosely," Julie says. An impeccable attention to detail is also key. Adam and Julie personally meet and interview every chef before signing them up to cook a dinner at Harvestville.

Some chefs, like Ashley Phillips, are based in Iowa. Ashley owns Chef A LLC and has done dinners at Harvestville for the past



four years. But Adam and Julie have also connected with chefs in Columbia, Missouri, and Quincy, Illinois. As they've built these relationships, they've gotten leads for new chefs to reach out to. The positive feedback loop has helped the Hohls' farm-to-table dinners gain momentum.

The events are beneficial for the chefs too: Cooking for the farm-to-table dinners lets them expand their clientele and connect with more local producers. It's a system that aims to fortify local food systems. More chefs connecting with farmers means more local food on plates – and more opportunities for farmers.

Creating a Local Menu

Every meal consists of five courses – and anything Adam and Julie can source locally, they do. “Iowa, to us, is local,” Julie says. But she notes that, being so close to Missouri and Illinois, they sometimes get ingredients from those states. While seasonality can affect what's available, Adam and Julie do their best to find as many ingredients as possible from farmers they know.

The chefs also help with sourcing when it's their turn. Since they're booked weeks in advance, they have time to start planning menus. This year, for instance, Ashley knew she was

“We're just constantly reinventing ourselves and being creative.”

- Julie Hohl

scheduled to cook on May 16. “I knew to use asparagus and some greens,” Ashley says. “Generally speaking, I start with what can I get local, what's going to be in season, and I go from there. And then I try to change it up a little bit and use techniques or flavor profiles people may not know and try to create a different experience.”

Because the menu is set, guests have a chance to try new foods. “I think the biggest compliment I get is that someone didn't like this vegetable [beforehand], but I made them enjoy it,” Ashley says. She describes her style as “very, very vegetable-forward,” and says that the focus on procuring locally adds to the joy of cooking for Harvestville's dinners. “Any chance you can have to work with local farmers or small businesses I think is beneficial not only to me, but to the community as well. It's a win in my book.”

Adam and Julie aim to source at least half of the products on the menu from local farmers. But in the peak of the growing season, some meals are almost entirely locally sourced. On the cooking prep side, the Hohls do what they can to make the job as easy as possible for their chefs. “Because we have chefs that come from such a distance, we try to provide pots and seasonings,” Julie says.

Once the menu is designed, Adam and Julie work with the chef to source products. Each chef approaches the task differently. But typically, if Harvestville can't supply the item from their own farm and the chef can't find it, Julie and Adam will work to find it for them. Sometimes, however, ingredients aren't available. Trends change and weather affects availability, both of which can lead to a menu change.

For the May 16 meal at Harvestville, the Hohls and Ashley have sourced pork, asparagus, greens and radishes locally. Ashley has turned these ingredients (along with others) into a mouthwatering array of dishes: a salad of peas, radishes and arugula; seared polenta with butternut squash, pickled shallots and whipped goat cheese; a spinach-ricotta lasagna; pork tenderloin with cauliflower and asparagus; and a lemon tart with blueberries for dessert.

As guests wait for the various courses on the menu, the barn hums with conversation. Outside it's gently raining. But inside, it's warm and cozy as guests savor delicious food – each bite, a thread connecting local farmers, chefs and community. ■



Harvestville's Farm-to-Table Dinner Menu for May 16:

Peas & Radishes:

Arugula / Sherry-Honey Vinaigrette / Lemon
Crème Fraîche / Sunflower Seeds

Seared Polenta:

Whipped Goat Cheese / Butternut Squash / Pickled
Shallot / Parsley Oil / Pomegranate Molasses

Lasagna:

Spinach / Ricotta / Tomato Sauce / Béchamel /
Basil Puree / Buttery Panko

Pork Tenderloin:

Cauliflower Puree / Herbed Asparagus / Asparagus
Puree / Shaved Cauliflower / Lemon-Herb Beurre
Monté / Micro Greens

Lemon Tart:

Lemon Curd / Blueberry / Meringue

2026 FIELD DAY Season

Visiting farms to see what farmers do and how they do it is one of the best ways to learn about farming. PFI field days give our farmer-hosts a platform to share what works for them – and what isn't working. They also give attendees the chance to look, listen and learn from other farmers while building connections and peer networks. Here's a glimpse, in images, of the diverse topics, farms, vistas and hands-on learning guests have had a chance to experience at field days so far this season.





1



2

Opposite page: Caleb Akin shares about the sunflowers he grows with farming partner Noah Wendt at A&W Farms' field day exploring organic crop diversification. (July 21, Cambridge, IA) **(1)** Carl the Great Pyrenees, was wary of the crowd gathered at Stennie Nelson's field day. He took his job guarding Ginseng, Cardamom, Irving, Inga, Ghibli, Chive, Harmony and Ivy, the sheep he was tasked with watching, very seriously. (June 22, Turin, IA) **(2)** Alex Ebert (far left) chats with field day attendees while they bottle and label honey. (July 23, Lynnville, IA) **(3)** Corn rises above terminated twin rows of a rye cover crop on Greg Keller's farm at his early-June field day (June 4, Monroe, NE)

3





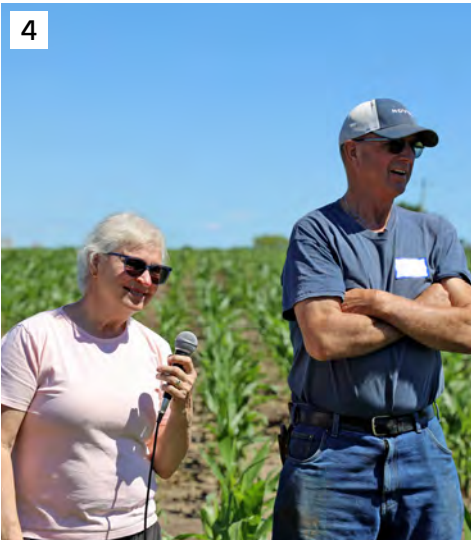
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(1) Lee Matteson explains how he uses and manages hydroponics to grow lettuce year-round in his high tunnel. *(June 5, Nevada, IA)* **(2)** Mike Bassett demonstrates his system of quickly setting up and taking down fence when moving cattle. *(June 27, Ames, IA)* **(3)** Tim Youngquist has converted nearly 5 acres of his farm to prairie, making room for beneficial insects as well as natural beauty. *(June 10, Zearing, IA)* **(4)** John and Margaret Hogan stand amid corn and farm equipment while taking questions from field day attendees about no-till systems and their cover crop experiences. *(June 19, Earlville, IA)* **(5)** Alan Zellmer gets comfortable as he watches his son talking to their field day attendees about how they make rylage for cattle feed. *(June 1, Atlantic, IA)*

(6) A purple-top turnip picked for attendees to see up close while visiting plots of various cover crop species and mixes at Eric Fara's field day. *(July 28, Irwin, IA)* **(7)** Dale Raasch and his son, Tyler, smile together in front of their Bridgewater Farm sign before starting their field day on organic vegetable production. *(July 15, Bridgewater, IA)* **(8)** Joe Rowe refills his drone during a cover crop seeding demonstration at his field day. *(July 14, Osage, IA)* **(9)** Greg Keller shows how he designed a custom cover crop drill with help from Quality Drills. Greg uses the drill to interseed a twin-row rye cover crop with a cash crop. *(June 4, Monroe, NE)* **(10)** Jim Palmer chats with field day attendees about the pros and cons of skid loaders. *(June 14, Castalia, IA)*

2









(1) Mike DeCook's family property is home to remnant prairie, areas that have never seen a plow. This spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*) flower is just one of about 200 species of plants that can be found in such areas. (June 23, Lovilia, IA) (2) Attendees appreciate the plants and vistas as they trek through the Loess Hills at Stennie Nelson's field day. Stennie has worked with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to restore native prairie in part by grazing her sheep. (June 22, Turin, IA) (3) Guests look out over the prairie habitat Ed Olson planted to create a buffer along a creek on his Nebraska property. (June 23, Craig, NE) (4) Ben Offenburger lures a calf over while talking about his intensive grazing management practices. (June 18, Chariton, IA) (5) Ray Meylor demonstrates soil health principles on his farm, with help from a young assistant. (June 5, Polk City, IA) (6) Cathy Linker Lafrenz explains how she manages her you-pick flower garden, including her custom flower bed cages. (June 10, Donahue, IA) (7) Mark and Brenda Kingland pose with daughter Sara McCulloh and son-in-law Stuart McCulloh at the end of their field day. The event highlighted PFI's Cover crop Business Accelerator Program and featured a drone demonstration. (July 20, Forest City, IA)





1

(1) Ken Fawcett showcases prairie strips planted between his corn fields. These strips reduce soil erosion and nutrient loss while providing a home for monarchs and other wildlife. (July 22, West Branch, IA) (2) Bob Pearson explains how oats fit into the organic row crop operation he runs with his wife, Sara Pearson. They also shared the story of their organic transition. (June 26, Wesley, IA) (3) Scott and Dawn Lightly's winter camelina is almost ready to be harvested for biofuel. (June 16, Oakland, MN) (4) Mike Bassett shows the fence post holder he built for his side-by-side. (June 27, Ames, IA) (5) Mark Schleisman explains how tile drainage is pumped into his new wetland, which filters the water and supplies irrigation to his neighboring popcorn fields. (June 30, Lytton, IA)

(6) Attendee's look at Jill Beebout's two alpacas, which bring fiber and joy to her diversified farm. (June 28, Chariton, IA) (7) Scurrying piglets hurry to catch up to their mother as she moves back out onto the pasture at Harry Cope's field day. (July 17, Truxton, MO) (8) Ryan and Tarin Tiefenthaler pose with their daughter, Sloan, after a successful field day showcasing their seed cleaning business. (July 9, Carroll, IA) (9) Attendees get a closer look at Brian Corkill's soybean stand and the ground cover left behind by the preceding cereal rye cover crop. (July 1, Galva, IL) (10) Attendees commune with the farm cats as Catherine Schut discusses the installation and benefits of her "petite prairie." (July 17, Prairie City, IA)

2





A Rewilding Land Ethic

By Amos
Johnson

Mike DeCook's passion is restoring wildness on his land. He's using nature-inspired grazing practices to transform it into a place where native species, birds and cattle can thrive

"With the endless human growth and development that keeps swallowing up everything I love, I try my best to be a counter to that to restore open space. It's for wildlife, but it's also for my soul."

– Mike DeCook

Sometimes, if you're in the right place, or right moment, you can almost imagine what it must have been like many summers ago. There are no cars droning on the highway because the highway, and cars for that matter, don't exist. The rumble of a train won't be heard until sometime in the future.

But there is not silence. Here on the prairie, a cacophonous symphony of noise abounds. Billions of bugs buzz and whirl. Scores of birds fill the air with boisterous chatter and the beat of wings. In the prairie wetlands that dot the landscape, legions of frogs boom and croak. Plants crunch and swish as vast herds of ungulates graze and tramp. At times, they bellow, and the earth thrums with the rumble of their hooves as they move on their endless migration.

These sounds were ubiquitous across much of the Great Plains and Midwest from about 8,000 years ago, when post-glacial climatic shifts led grasslands to spread, until about 150 years ago, when white settlement started drastically changing the landscape. The base upon which this bevy of life relied was the extraordinary abundance – both in biomass and species diversity – of grasses and forbs that once comprised the most extensive continuous ecosystem in North America.

It's estimated grasslands historically spanned 550 million to 1 billion acres, from parts of Ohio to the Rocky Mountains, and from central Canada to Texas. Iowa was once around 80% prairie. Today, that number has plunged to less than 0.1% due to habitat loss from farming and development.

But on his southern Iowa farm, sprawling across the hills outside Lovilia, Mike DeCook is trying to bring back some of this vanishing ecosystem to his family's land.

"My passion in life is protecting the natural world – wild nature, open space, restoring native biodiversity," Mike says while standing in a wave of waist-high pasture. "The cattle, and grazing, is our income source, and one of our tools."

The Ethic

Mike has developed a land ethic that guides how he manages the interconnected web of livestock and land that make up his farm. "I care about all species on this earth, not just human beings," Mike says. "I want the woodland warblers to thrive, and I want the grass. I want insects, mammals, everything."



Mike DeCook contract-grazes 650 head of cattle. Each paddock gets grazed about once a year.



Mike explains his land management strategies while standing in the midst of a prairie remnant at his field day on June 23, 2026.

To achieve this diverse cornucopia, Mike's goal is to return the land as closely to wildness as he can manage using the tools at his disposal. In the grazing season, he contract-grazes 650 head of cattle, rotating every two weeks and never returning to a spot more than once in a year.

In the early spring and late summer, Mike burns much of his grassland. Throughout the year, he continuously cuts and spot-sprays invasive woody species that have encroached on and consumed open spaces since the last bison roamed freely across the state. (The last known sighting of wild bison in Iowa was near Spirit Lake, in 1870.) And whenever he can, he removes human-made infrastructure. So far, Mike has ripped out miles of fenceline and torn down barns and sheds.

"With the endless human growth and development that keeps swallowing up everything I love, I try my best to be a counter to that to restore open space," Mike says. "It's for wildlife, but it's also for my soul."

Grazing for Birds

Mike's grazing system mimics the pattern of use and rest that occurred on the prairie when bison were present and migrating. Because of this approach, plants are responding. Mike is seeing a transformation towards a more diverse makeup of native species. It takes years of focused management, and an occasional scattering of native seeds. But as Mike says, "prairie is patience. There's an art to waiting. But it's awful rewarding when it happens."

This increase in plant diversity is cascading upwards, positively affecting everything that relies on those plants. "In a pasture with only 10 species, you might have protein and carbohydrates," Mike says. "Here, there are 170 different plant species for a cow to choose from, and that's medicine to them."

He's also seeing a greater diversity of birds. Different bird species require different lengths of grass for nesting and foraging, he explains. "There's some birds that actually like it real short, and some need it tall and rank. With our grazing system, you'll have short stuff on the area that was just grazed. But there's also the ones [grasses] we haven't grazed since November and won't be back to for months."

In June, Mike and his sons, Joshua and Wyatt, hosted a PFI field day about their efforts to create grassland bird habitat through nature-inspired grazing practices. Tucker Lutter, who serves as the Iowa conservation manager for Audubon Society, spoke at the field day and emphasized why restoring native plant species is vital for grassland birds.

"A lot of these native grasses are bunch grasses – the bluestems and the switchgrass – that grow in clumps. The [invasive] Eurasian species tend to grow in a mat," Tucker says. That habitat makes a big difference for small birds, like quail chicks and turkey poults. Native bunch grasses, Tucker says, leave gaps and paths that are easier for these small birds to navigate. They also provide abundant food.

"They're getting all the insect benefits provided by all these flowers. Plus they're able to walk on these little alleyways, whereas they'd be stumbling over really thick mats of vegetation in your traditional cool-season cattle pasture," he says. "We might think all grass is the same, but if you're a 3-inch-tall bird fledgling, that's a big difference."

Creating this kind of habitat is what motivates Mike. "We have so much wildlife just because we have good, diverse habitat," Mike says. "Don't get me wrong, we have a lot of invasive species and there's a lot I mess up, but I know I'm doing the right thing when I see bobolinks and harriers and snakes."

Mike's land is still a work in progress. But standing in his pasture – dappled with blooming prairie and savanna stretching all around – you don't have to close your eyes to imagine what the land could have looked like so long ago. Guided by his land ethic, Mike is starting to bring back the joyful din of wildness.

"I just think the world would be a lot better place if ... most people had, you know, a little bit of a land ethic," Mike says. "It would be not only for humanity, but for all the other species we share this earth with." ■

Adding Value, Growing Opportunity

Beginning farmers are turning their passions into unique products that delight customers while building their businesses.

By Rachel Burke

For beginning farmers, building a viable farm business often means finding ways to make the most of what they grow. Value-added products can provide an important opportunity to increase the value of farm products while creating additional income streams over the winter months. For some, value-added products provide an inroad to establishing their budding businesses.

Here are three snapshots of PFI farmers who are doing just that: carving a niche by creating unique value-added products for their customers.

A Novel Nut Oil | *Levi Geyer*

Levi Geyer established Fancy Twig Farm in Parnell, Iowa, in spring 2023 with a vision of foraging nuts, pressing oil and eventually planting an orchard. His oil of choice? Hickory nuts – a tree crop vital for thousands of years to Indigenous Peoples across the eastern U.S. but largely unfamiliar in modern mainstream food systems.

“Hickory nut oil is light, nutty and delicate in flavor,” Levi says. “It’s softer and more mellow than olive oil, with a similar smoke point.”

Levi first learned about hickory nut oil while reading “Trees of Power” by Akiva Silver. “The book mentioned hickory nut oil and noted that not many people were producing it,” he says. “I had been hoping to establish a chestnut orchard, and I wanted another canopy tree and crop to complement the chestnuts. Chestnut trees can be prone to oak wilt, and having hickory trees between them can help reduce the risk of disease spread.”

Today, Levi forages all the hickory nuts he uses to make oil from wild trees – specifically, from bitternut hickories (also known as yellowbud hickory). Iowa has six native species of hickory. But of those, nuts from bitternut hickories have the highest oil content – 70–80% – and much thinner shells. Still, Levi



Photos courtesy of Levi Geyer



Levi Geyer

says producing 1 gallon of finished hickory nut oil requires about 15 gallons of nuts. To get the supply he needs, he drives as much as an hour and a half “to forage as many nuts as possible.”

Production has grown from 3 quarts in his first year to 50 gallons in his third year. He sells the oil through his farm website, at the Iowa City farmers market and via on-farm sales. Despite the rapid growth, Levi estimates he needs to produce about 100 gallons annually to be profitable. To help him on the path, he applied for PFI’s Savings Incentive Program. The two-year program offers mentorship and business planning support, along with a savings match.

“I’m learning financial modeling for my business,” he says. “I started with how much I’d like to earn, then worked backward to understand gross profit, overhead costs and the production volume I need to make those earnings.”

The hickory nut oil community has also helped him grow. At present, there’s not much research available for hickory nut oil producers – and Levi says misconceptions about hickory nut trees abound. The community of nut oil producers is helping fill the gap. “We rely on each other for troubleshooting and sharing data.”

Medicinal Herbs | *Cal and Zak Wolfpack*

A couple of hours west, about 30 miles south of Des Moines, Cal and Zak Wolfpack are carving out a value-added niche with medicinal herbs. They own and operate *Profound Existence Herbs* in Milo, Iowa, where they produce medicinal herbs and plants, fruits, vegetables and eggs. Cal is also a clinical and community herbalist, offering care through clinics at Pollinator Hive House in Des Moines.

“My interest in living in right relationship with the Earth got me into herbal medicine,” Cal says. “I feel like farming and herbal medicine can’t be separated.” Through *Profound Existence Herbs*, Cal and Zak are in their fourth year selling tinctures, teas, incense bundles, salves and other herbal extracts.

While the Wolfpacks are still analyzing sales data from the past few years, Cal has identified clear trends. “Teas sell really well, but they’re at a lower price point,” says Cal, who uses the pronoun they. “Tinctures are higher priced, but we sell fewer

of them, so I feel like we need both. It’s also about having the right product for the right person.”

They note other tradeoffs, too. Tinctures are produced by the gallon and have a long shelf life. Teas are simpler to make but require significant storage space for dried herbs. Today, most sales happen in person at farmers markets. Cal also takes orders by email. “I don’t have a web store, and I’m not interested in one,” they say. “I really try to focus on selling in person.”

Cal’s passion for herbal medicine began in their 20s, during a time when they and friends lacked health insurance and “didn’t have the skills to take care of ourselves.” While Cal didn’t set out to build a business around herbal medicine, they’re pleased with the direction their path has taken.

“I started studying so I could help care for people. It’s always been rooted in social justice, access to medicine and living in right relationship with the Earth.”

(Continued on page 32 →)



Zak and Cal Wolfpack (left) with their son, Calyx, and Cal's father, Leland Searles.

Photos courtesy of Cal Wolfpack

A Piquant Pepper Sauce | *Alfred Matiyabo*

In Iowa City, Alfred Matiyabo has carved out a different sort of niche – one with a kick. He grows habanero peppers, onions, white eggplant and other crops on his 4½-acre farm, Africando Farms. About 70% of profits come from value-added hot sauce sales.

With a mischievous grin, Alfred says, “My sauce is a little spicy.” It’s an understatement. He started his operation in 2018 and says he first tried selling his hot peppers in bulk, but the profit margin was too small. “I knew I needed a value-added product,” he says. He then tried buying peppers to make sauce, but margins were worse.

“The only way to increase my profit margin was to grow the ingredients and process the hot sauce myself,” he says. A friend of Alfred’s connected him with Ansel Cummings of Awesome Sauce, based in Riverside, Iowa, who spent two hours on the phone with Alfred explaining licensing, food safety training, testing and pH requirements. Packaging and labeling are Alfred’s biggest costs; he buys bottles by the pallet, but his ability to scale up his operation is limited because he still

bottles by hand. To address this, Alfred is currently applying for grants for a pneumatic filler.

To market his hot sauce, Alfred has been visiting shops across Iowa and beyond. “I go state by state, in person,” he says. “Last year, I targeted Ohio. I started in Cincinnati and stopped at African grocery stores and other places where I thought people would enjoy really hot sauce. I ask for the owner or manager, leave a business card and offer a sample.”

Because many retailers hesitate to place an order right away, Alfred offers them a trial period. “I tell them to try the product for two or three weeks and see how it goes. When I come back, they can purchase sauce by the case. If they don’t have to pay up front, they’re more willing to give it a try.”

Alfred also sells to a distributor in Florida. “He’s my largest buyer right now,” Alfred says. Looking ahead, he plans to expand into more states, add bottling equipment and develop a milder second sauce for customers who can’t take the heat. ■

To market his hot sauce, Alfred has been visiting shops across Iowa and beyond. “I go state by state, in person,” he says. “Last year, I targeted Ohio. I started in Cincinnati and stopped at African grocery stores and other places where I thought people would enjoy really hot sauce.”



Alfred Matiyabo

Michael R. Rosmann's “Meditations on Farming”

Reviewed by Beth Hoffman

Michael Rosmann “arrived in Iowa, just as the farm crisis of the 1980s was ramping up.” He spent the rest of his career – more than 45 years – trying “to figure out why farming was so incredibly stressful and why so many farmers turned to suicide when foreclosure threatened or caused the loss of their family farm.”

This is one of the questions Michael – a clinical psychologist and fourth-generation farmer (he’s a PFI member who grew up on a farm near Harlan, Iowa) – deals with in his book “Meditations on Farming: The Agrarian Drive, Stress and Mental Health.” The book, published in November 2024, details some of these experiences with farmers, as well as his years as an administrator and academic who worked to bring the concept of “behavioral health” to the agricultural community.

The book is also part memoir, featuring several essays and vignettes on fishing, faith, family and other personal stories. While many of these chapters do not directly address the volume’s title topics, the book still makes important points about farmer mental health.

I won’t go into the economic triggers or difficult financial decisions that make farming risky business – many of you reading this review are familiar with those. But Michael goes far deeper into a fascinating theory he has developed as to why farmers do what they do. He calls it the “agrarian imperative,” which he says “explains why people farm and why they sometimes cling to their land and resources to the point that they sacrifice themselves ... impacting the lives of others who depend upon them.”

Michael makes the case that, for many of us, farming is quite literally in our blood. Human societies evolved because of farming. The cultures that turned to raising their own food, instead of just relying on hunting and gathering, flourished. The genes that made societies successful were passed down and farming became part of our genetic makeup. “The agrarian imperative drive instills farmers to endure severe adversity,” he writes, “[and] to cling desperately to their farmland when its loss is threatened.”

This theory, Michael argues, explains why people gravitate to farming. But these same traits can also be at the core of our inability to let go, sell off land we can’t afford or take a job that might mean more financial stability for our families. “The behaviors associated with their agrarian imperative,” he writes, “can work against farmers’ well-being when they

become overwhelmed from prolonged stress, anxiety, fatigue and depression, which sometimes results in suicidal – and less occasionally, homicidal – urges.”

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, farmers have higher rates of suicide than the general public (as do those who work in mining, construction and the arts). The physical and mental stress of these professions leads people to suicide more often than those who work in other challenging jobs, like teachers, doctors or landscapers. When things go sideways, Michael argues, it can be a crushing blow to farmers’ psyches, especially for those who do not seek help.

Michael’s chapter “Why People Farm” is particularly thought-provoking. In it, he muses on how even those who grew up in the city can almost immediately show their genetic disposition for farming. “How quickly their bodies harden and toughen when we leave an urban lifestyle and become immersed in nature,” he writes. “Our fingers thicken and our hands enlarge; our movements, such as scooping grain or digging a trench, become efficient, and our manners become geared toward accomplishing tasks with a minimum of energy and physical wear and tear.”

Although I wouldn’t claim my hands got any bigger or that I am more “competitive about acquiring suitable farmland” after moving to my husband’s family’s farm, it does ring true that “farmers experience fulfillment in producing essentials for life – food, fiber and fuel – for families, neighborhoods and the larger human community.”

2026 is yet another difficult time for farmers, and mental and behavioral health is of critical importance. Michael’s book is timely and helps readers understand how the field of psychology is able to assist farmers in navigating challenging waters. ■



Beth Hoffman has written for NPR, The Guardian and Civil Eats and authored the book “Bet the Farm: The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America.” She lives and farms with her husband, John Hogeland, at Whippoorwill Creek Farm near Lovilia, Iowa. She hosts the podcast “At the Iowa Farm Table” for the Iowa Food System Coalition.



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.



Farm friends take a catnap on a hot afternoon in late June. (Margaret Wolter, Sandhill Acres, Chelsea, Iowa)



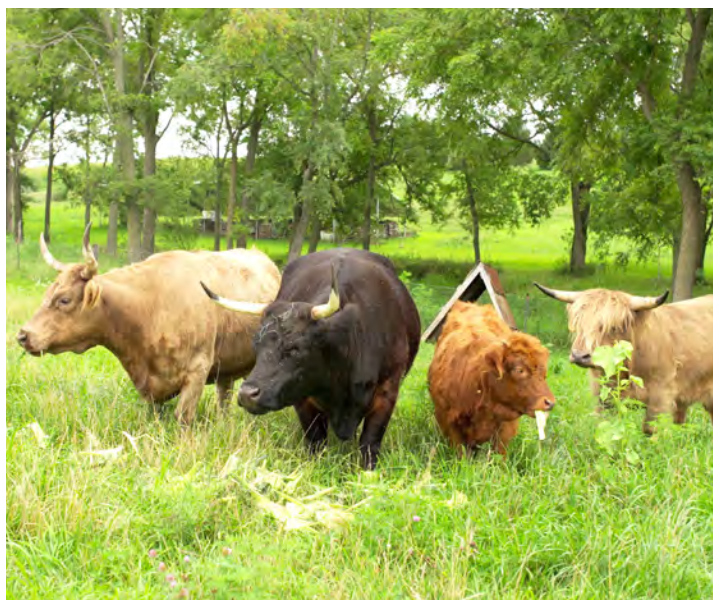
Plating desserts for a farm-to-table dinner. (Marina Crosbie, Walker Homestead Farm & Winery, Iowa City, Iowa)



A drone's-eye view of the ewes on Kernza pasture. (Lee Tesdell, Tesdell Century Farm, Slater, Iowa)



Nubian dairy goats browsing during mulberry season. (Lindsay Kaiser, Kaiser Fresh Farm, Waverly, Iowa)



Highland cows graze in a pasture. (Marina Crosbie, Walker Homestead Farm & Winery, Iowa City, Iowa)



Out on a quick family picnic in the pasture. (Nicole Josselyn, Josselyn Acres, Henderson, Iowa)



Lennie the guard llama standing in the water tank on the Kernza pasture. (Lee Tesdell, Tesdell Century Farm, Slater, Iowa)



Sunset after netting haskaps (also known as honeyberries) planted between heartnuts alongside the prairie. (Suzan Erem, Draco Hill Nature Farm, West Branch, Iowa)



PFI member Jacob Bolson strip-tills and applies liquid fertilizer into cover crop residue in the field “East of Bess” for PFI members Jane and Beth Richards. (Jacob Bolson, Eldora, 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!

Meet the Newest Members of PFI's Team

Learn more about the PFI staff at practicalfarmers.org/staff.



Amber Mohr

Business Development Manager

Amber raises pastured eggs and chemical-free produce with her family in Avoca, Iowa. She enjoys hiking in the Loess Hills, cooking and reading classic books aloud with her children.



Josiah Pollock

Field Crops Education Coordinator

A native of the Pacific Northwest, Josiah worked for an agricultural living history museum where he was introduced to sustainable agriculture and a love for small grains. In his free time, Josiah spends time with his wife Kassie, volunteers for his church, reads, gardens and knits.



Valeria Cano Camacho Tidemann

Office Manager

We are pleased to welcome back a familiar face to PFI. Valeria Cano Camacho Tidemann has rejoined the staff as office manager. She previously served as PFI's senior Latino engagement coordinator from 2023-2026.

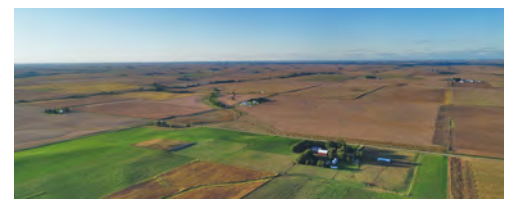
In her free time, Valeria enjoys anything crafty, reading and spending time with her loved ones. She resides in Ames with her partner, Austin, and their cavapoo pup, Lunita.

Looking for Land? Explore PFI's Land Listings Directory

Are you looking for land to start or grow your farm? Or do you want to find the next generation who will care for your land? Our land listings directory is meant to connect retiring farmers or landowners who want to see the next generation care for their land with beginning farmers looking for land to begin or expand their farming enterprises.

If you're currently looking for land, the directory includes listings spanning a range of acres and locations. Most listings are currently in Iowa, but can also include out-of-state opportunities as well. If you have land available, adding it to PFI's land listings directory can help you find a buyer, tenant or beginning farmer to take over your operation.

Explore the latest listings at practicalfarmers.org/land-matching. There, you'll also find forms for adding your land to the directory or inquiring about a current land opportunity. ■



Apply To Join Our Next Savings Incentive Program Class

When starting a farm, you oversee everything from production to business management. The Savings Incentive Program is designed to help beginning farmers stay accountable to their financial goals and to creating a business plan.

Over two years, participants will increase their network, build a robust business plan and grow their farm savings. This program is ideal for beginning farmers who have between one and seven years of farm management experience.

What's Involved?

- **Business Planning** – Create, implement and improve a farm business plan.
- **Network-Building** – Participate in cohort networking events and get connected to area experts in finance and marketing.
- **Mentorship** – Get matched with an established farmer mentor based on topics of interest.
- **Capital Investing** – Contribute to savings throughout the course of this two-year program. PFI will match up to \$4,000 of savings to use toward the purchase of a farm asset or assets.

For more information and to apply by the deadline of Oct. 23, 2026, visit practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program. ■



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.



OCTOBER

OCT. 10 • Farmland Owner Legacy Award Celebration
Ledges State Park | Madrid, IA
Register at practicalfarmers.org/events

NOVEMBER

NOV. 21 • Iowa Farmers of Color Conference
9 a.m.-5 p.m. | Harvest Vineyard Church | Ames, IA | Free
For more information, contact Rachel at rachel.burke@practicalfarmers.org

DECEMBER

DEC. 4 • Shared Learning Call
Noon-1 p.m. | Online | Free
Learn more at practicalfarmers.org/shared-learning-calls

DEC. 10-11 • Cooperators' Meeting | Ames, IA
Contact Stefan at stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org
Learn more at practicalfarmers.org/cooperators-meeting



Find PFI At

OCTOBER

OCTOBER 13 • Agriculture and Life Sciences Career Day at Iowa State University | Ames, IA
Learn more at career.cals.iastate.edu/cals-career-day

NOVEMBER

NOV. 13-14 • 2026 Emerging Farmers Conference
Brooklyn Center, MN
Learn more at tinyurl.com/ms8bkcyd

NOV. 18-19 • Upper Midwest Farmland Summit
Madison, WI
Learn more at tickettailor.com/events/renewingthecountryside/2212753

NOV. 18-20 • 2026 NAFB Convention
Kansas City, MO
Learn more at nafb.com/events/nafb-convention

DECEMBER

DEC. 1-4 • 51st Annual Acres U.S.A. Eco-Ag Conference & Trade Show | Coralville, IA
Learn more at conference.acresusa.com

PFI Current Enrollments

From October - December 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.

Petite Prairies Program

ROLLING APPLICATION
practicalfarmers.org/petite-prairies

N Rate Risk Protection Program

ENROLLMENT ENDS APRIL 30, 2027
practicalfarmers.org/n-rate-risk-protection-program

Grazing Infrastructure Cost-Share

ENROLLMENT OPENS DEC. 1-15
practicalfarmers.org/grazing-infrastructure-cost-share

Produce Safety Cost-Share

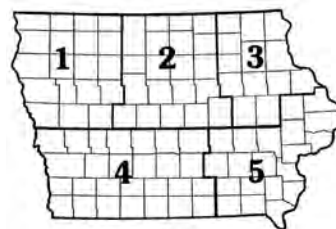
STAY TUNED FOR OPEN ENROLLMENT
practicalfarmers.org/produce-safety-cost-share

Savings Incentive Program

OPENS AUG 10-OCT 23
practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program

Welcome, New Members!

From May 14 – July 26, 2026



DISTRICT 1 – NORTHWEST

- Kelli Barnett – Dolliver
- Stryker Husk – Coon Rapids
- Jill Oltmanns – Le Mars
- Dominyk Price – Estherville
- Ethan Smith – Storm Lake
- Nicholas Smith – Storm Lake

DISTRICT 2 – NORTH CENTRAL

- Jordan Branstad – Leland
- Jemma Bullock – Ames
- Rodney Bunn – Story City
- Richard Cirone – Ames
- Brittany Decker – Fort Dodge
- Ben Johnson – Story City
- Jayden Jorgensen – Rudd
- Isaac Larson – Fort Dodge
- Jacqueline Pippin – Marshalltown
- Glen Ritchie – Ames
- Matthew Storby – Lake Mills
- Jackson Walker – State Center
- Brandon Wilson – Colo

DISTRICT 3 – NORTHEAST

- Ashley Burns – Garnaville
- Mayleen Gonzalez – Waverly
- Mary Beth Haglin – Cedar Rapids
- Brian Logan – Marion

- Jill Norton – Cedar Falls
- David Schmidt – Oelwein

DISTRICT 4 – SOUTHWEST

- Julie Goetsch – Chariton
- Shane Isley – Des Moines
- Todd Kruse – Clive
- Matthew Thomas – Coin
- Ethan Zellmer – Atlantic

DISTRICT 5 – SOUTHEAST

- Miah Bowen – Montezuma
- Porter Campbell – Center Junction
- Sam Davis – Iowa City
- Jessica Larghe – West Chester
- Rebecca Lee – Brighton
- Faith Reeves – Fairfield
- Glenda Wiese – What Cheer

DISTRICT 6 – OUT OF STATE

- Megan Allison – Stockton, IL
- Randall Noe – Rio, IL
- Andrew Richardson – Centralia, IL
- Scott Cedarquist – Bangor, MI
- Dustin Anderson – Madison, MN
- James Backman – Herman, MN
- Bryan Biegler – Lake Wilson, MN
- Micah Bos – Luverne, MN

- Aaron Deal – Wheaton, MN
- Rick Flower – Benson, MN
- Kurt Goebel – Burtrum, MN
- Glenn Hjelle – Elbow Lake, MN
- Creighton Houghlum – Faribault, MN
- Ben Johnson – De Graff, MN
- Kevin Lundebrek – Starbuck, MN
- Connor McCormick – Caledonia, MN
- Cody Ruka – Clara City, MN
- Jim Sam – Faribault, MN
- Mike Slater – Lino Lakes, MN
- Eric Vahling – Princeton, MN
- Andrew Voorhees – Danvers, MN
- Harry Cope – Truxton, MO
- Damon Birkhofer – Kimball, NE
- Lynn Brazda – Wahoo, NE
- Rick Bristol – Ansley, NE
- Tyrel Entz – Mason City, NE
- Seth Gutz – Osmond, NE
- Andy McLaughlin – Elmwood, NE
- Danny Poss – Scotia, NE
- Rodney Wolgemuth – Elizabethtown, PA
- Alan Aughenbaugh – Iroquois, SD
- Kirk Aughenbaugh – Huron, SD
- Braydn Lingbeck – Brookings, SD
- Chad Malone – De Smet, SD
- Joshua Trautman – Rock Springs, WI
- Daniel Wolande – Walworth, WI

Thank you

to our newest lifetime members!

Brittany Decker
Fort Dodge, IA

Jon Flattery
Fort Dodge, IA

Isaac Larson
Fort Dodge, IA

Stennie Nelson
Turin, IA

Mic Skaar
Hayward, MN

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.



A mother Hereford and her calf gaze in unison at some activity happening on the far side of the field at the Wiese family field day near Manning, Iowa, on Aug. 11, 2026.

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What Does Legacy Mean To You?

Jill Beebout of Blue Gate Farm near Chariton, Iowa, ponders this question for herself and her farm. Read Jill's reply and learn more about PFI's Legacy Society on page 6 in the Giving and Growing section.

