



THE ALABAMA
SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURE
NETWORK

ASAN UPDATE

Spring 2014

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AN OFF-BOTTOM INSPIRATION ON THE GULF

By Jim Langcuster and Bill Walton

Some business trailblazers often talk of an entrepreneurial Road to Damascus moment — some flash of insight that led to business success.

Not so with Bayou La Batre resident Steve Crockett. Civic idealism — his work as a volunteer with the Mobile Bay Estuary Program’s Oyster Gardening, which seeks to optimize the habitats of the region’s oyster population — sparked the interest that led him to become the region’s first commercial off-bottom oyster farmer.

Crockett has expanded his

annual harvest from 30,000 to 60,000 oysters in the three years since he first began raising oysters commercially. In a year or two, he hopes to expand to 120,000. In a few more years, his harvest could exceed half a million.

Along with this steady growth, Crockett’s brand, Point aux Pins oysters, has acquired a niche in upscale specialty markets



Photo credit: Bill Walton

and an unqualified thumbs up from one of the nation’s leading food critics and oyster connoisseurs. “They’ve got the look of a classic Northeast oyster, but they

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WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR SOIL? THE BASICS OF SOIL FERTILITY

By Michael LaBelle

Sometimes, problems with a garden, crop or landscape can be baffling. When friends or customers call me for help, a comprehensive soil test is usually the tool needed to solve the mystery. Let’s look at two examples.



Tomatoes suffering from blossom end rot. Photo credit: Michael LaBelle

Farmer Green and Neighbor Nancy have different symptoms, but we will discover they have a deficiency in common. Farmer Green had a shipment of cauliflower rejected by a grocer. The heads looked fine on the outside, but the centers had cavities and the texture was poor. Neighbor Nancy’s tomatoes show uneven ripening, and her blossom end rot problem has continued in spite of regular watering and calcium amendments. Here’s my approach to figuring out both problems.

(Continued on page 3)

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS TO FIGHT HUNGER TAKE ROOT IN RUSSELL COUNTY

BeYond Expectations Community Outreach (BECO) is a community organization in Seale, AL, doing all they can to fight hunger in Russell County. BECO provides disadvantaged residents with food and clothing assistance and seeks to effect community development through increased education and community awareness and involvement. Their main goal, says Executive Director Cynthia McKinney, “is to provide help where and when it is needed, and to empower individuals and communities to become self-sufficient.”

McKinney and her colleagues saw their clients — and members of their

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LETTER FROM THE ASAN BOARD PRESIDENT



Bruce Buurma, a Huron County Ohio farmer, recently said, "We have a choice in this country. We're either going to have to import workers or we're going to have to import food."

I had to think about Bruce's statement for more than a moment. What causes Bruce to believe Americans will have to choose between those two options in the not so distant future? Could it be he is incorrectly reading the tomato leaves? Does his opinion truly represent current thinking among Americans? One has to hope not.

I have my own opinion about what we must decide in the near future. Option one is to choose to continue to promote unsustainable agricultural practices. Option two is to choose to promote the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices by America's farmers.

2014 is a new year. The 2014 Farm Bill is now the law of the land. No one is particularly happy about the cuts in the

funding of programs aimed at small and disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Again, the little guys and dolls were last to be seated at the table and got what was left over after the big guys were allowed to take what they wanted from the table. The more things change, the more they stay the same, according to an old French saying.

2014 also brings change to ASAN's leadership team. Edwin Marty passed the president's gavel to me. Thanks to Edwin for a doing such a great job leading ASAN over the past two years. Anne LaBelle was elected vice-president and Kirk Iversen was elected secretary of ASAN, while Myles Wright continues as ASAN's treasurer. Deborah Thomas, Program Director of FOCAL in Montgomery, and Jodie Powell, a farmer in Leroy, AL, joined ASAN's board of directors, and Alice Evans was promoted to ASAN executive director.

The ASAN members' dinner held in Mobile during the SSAWG Conference was a wonderful way for ASAN members to network and spend time with others from around the state who support

ASAN's mission. A number of new members were added prior to the event and others renewed their memberships.

The board met in February in Opelika to chart ASAN's course for 2014, laying out ASAN's 2014 budget and choosing programming priorities for the year. Those priorities include publishing a statewide food guide, building up ASAN's local structure to provide more opportunities for members to engage, continuing our work leading the Alabama Food Policy Council, and again hosting the Regional Food & Farm Forums. Be on the lookout for ways to get involved and support the work ASAN is doing around the state!

Finally, let us all remember that, like politics, agriculture is local. We will accomplish ASAN's mission of promoting Healthy Farms, Healthy Food, and Healthy Communities by working to change the things we can change in our local areas. Thanks for your continuing support of ASAN. Be safe, and keep on growing!

Gene Thornton
ASAN Board President

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Gene Thornton, ASAN Board President and owner-operator of Sneaky Crow Farm in Roanoke, AL

Alice Evans, ASAN Executive Director

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SOIL FERTILITY (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 1)

Soil testing

First, we need a *comprehensive* soil test, something beyond a routine university lime and fertilizer test. Without more information about what's going on in the soil, we'll simply waste more time and money on speculation. The tests I recommend cost \$25-30, and provide all the information we need. When you consider the cost of inputs, plus the time and value of a lost crop, a comprehensive soil analysis is money well spent. Once we have the results, we can develop a plan to correct any deficiencies.

Major Minerals

These are calcium, magnesium and potassium (*cations*, or positive minerals), nitrogen and phosphorus (*anions*, or negative minerals). Nitrogen isn't normally measured because it is so variable. In both cases, the soil analysis shows adequate major minerals, so we move on.

Micronutrients

Next, we address the minor and trace minerals. They are called "minor," not because they are less important, but because we need them in small amounts. "Trace" minerals are needed in *trace* amounts—parts per million (ppm) or parts per billion (ppb). I generally look at the minors sulfur, manganese, copper, boron and sodium. We don't normally test for trace minerals because it's cost prohibitive, but they are necessary for

growing the most flavorful, nutrient-dense food possible. Some complete fertilizers contain

minor and trace minerals, but if yours doesn't, you can amend with Azomite™, HumaTrace™, or another similar product. We discover that Farmer Green and Neighbor Nancy have the same problem—a boron deficiency.

Boron is the most commonly deficient micronutrient worldwide, partly due to the fact that the requirements seem insignificant. How important can a micronutrient be if less than one pound per acre is commonly recommended? Boron is critical for forming strong cell walls in plants. Boron deficiency causes deformed strawberries and cavities inside vegetables like cauliflower, broccoli and turnips. The produce might appear healthy on the outside, but a deficiency will be apparent when cut open, as in the case of Farmer Green's rejected cauliflower. (*A word of caution: boron toxicity problems can occur when soil has TOO MUCH boron, so testing is highly recommended when considering boron amendments.*)

Boron is also necessary for moving calcium into plants. A common expression is: "Calcium is the truck, boron is the driver." Nancy has applied an appropriate amount of calcium, but her calcium needs some help from boron. Based on her soil test, I recommend



Cauliflower compromised by a boron deficiency. Photo credit: Michael LaBelle

an application of one tablespoon of 20 Mule Team Borax to Nancy's 100 foot row of tomatoes.

Nancy's boron deficiency demonstrates how essential micronutrients are to plant health, but the greater issue is human health. We eat vegetables not only because they taste good, but also to bring essential nutrients into our bodies. Boron must be available in order for plants and humans to benefit from calcium. Recent osteoporosis research indicates that boron is necessary for human metabolism of calcium. This symbiotic relationship between boron and calcium is one of many found in nature. While boron is only needed in

tiny amounts, it is crucial to the overall health of plants and, by extension, the humans and animals consuming them.

The take-home messages here are *know what's going on in your soil* and *don't underestimate the importance of minor and trace minerals*. Most of our farmland has been abused, but the good news is that it can be restored. Generations of removing essential nutrients from the soil without any thought for returning those nutrients has created deficits and imbalances. With good information about what's going on in your soil you can make a plan to correct any problems and get back to your passion: growing healthy, nutrient-dense food for your friends, family and customers.



Deformed strawberries, caused by a boron deficiency. Photo credit: Michael LaBelle

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TRAINING A NEW GENERATION OF CAPABLE, COMPASSIONATE FARM ADVOCATES

By Rita Bennett-Chew

When farmers come to Benny Bunting, the Lead Farm Advocate at the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), they are often desperate for assistance. They may feel that a loan officer gave them an unfair decision or they may need help to restructure their existing loans. They may feel that they been discriminated against by government officials or commercial lenders, perhaps based on their gender, nationality, marital status, or racial background. No matter the situation, Benny sits down with them, listens, and gets to work.

Benny provides farmers with a broad array of advocacy services including financial counseling, legal referrals, and technical assistance. Each year, he counsels between 75 and 100 farmers and has helped to preserve an estimated \$50 million in assets for farmers and their families. In more than 90% of the cases he works on, Benny helps farmers attain greater financial stability by solidifying their financial plans, negotiating with their lenders, or helping them successfully navigate federal programs. He also regularly represents farmers in proceedings at the National Appeals Division of USDA, an entity established to manage claims and disputes con-

cerning the decisions made by USDA agencies.

Every day, farm advocates like Benny Bunting assist farmers when they need help the most. Unfortunately, just like many of the nation's farmers, many farm advocates are nearing retirement age. Most advocates practicing today emerged from the 1980s Farm Crisis, a period characterized by falling land values, rising interest rates, and encouragement from agricultural advisors to 'get big or get out.'

This generation of advocates is nearing retirement age, and yet there is still a dire for advocates. Farming is a complex and risky business, and by some accounts is more complicated now with the rise of more diverse farming practices, including smaller scale farms, organic operations, and selling to direct markets.

In an attempt to transfer the immense stores of knowledge of an older generation of advocates to a younger one, RAFI is launching a series of webinars on advocacy topics, beginning with an introduction to the field (Farm Ad-



Benny Bunting talks with farmers in Columbia, South Carolina. Photo courtesy of RAFI-USA.

vocacy 101). Additional topics include: Disaster Assistance Programs, Recognizing Discrimination, Farm Finance, How Predatory Lending Works, and Appealing USDA Decisions at the National Appeals Division, among others.

The webinars will be launched in early March. For more information please visit <http://rafiusa.org/programs/farmsustainability/advocacy-webinars/>

If you or your organization would like to receive in-depth advocacy trainings from RAFI's advocates, please contact our Program Director, Joe Schroeder, at joe@rafiusa.org.

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 1)

communities in general – struggling to make ends meet, having to choose between eating and paying for their utilities or medications. They saw folks having to pay to travel long distances just to get to a supermarket, which cut into the money they could spend on fresh, healthy food once they got there.

McKinney's vision is to turn Russell County's food deserts – areas with little access to affordable, healthy food – into food oases. This vision inspired



Contents of one of last year's food deliveries, supplied by the Plant a Row Program. Photo credit: Cynthia McKinney

BECO to join the national Plant a Row for the Hungry Initiative last year.

Plant A Row (PAR) was launched as a national initiative in 1995 by the Garden Writers Association (GWA). Plant A Row for

the Hungry is a program that encourages gardeners to grow a little extra and donate their produce to local soup kitchens and food pantries serving the homeless and hungry in their local communities.

McKinney says that PAR is a "people-helping-people program." PAR lies at the intersection of the four parts of BECO's mission: to meet the basic needs of low-income individuals, address issues of hunger, forge innovative partnerships, and empower self-sufficiency. McKinney says "Just as growing and eating from your own garden can improve your health, save you money and increase your sustainability, it does the same for others in need, through your generosity."

BECO worked with just a handful of gardeners in 2013, and they are seeking additional participants in 2014. Anyone with a garden is encouraged to plant a little extra to help provide hunger relief in

(Continued on page 5)

THE BENEFITS OF USING SILVOPASTURE TO “STACK” LIVESTOCK, FORESTRY, AND PASTURE

By Emily Stutzman-Jones

A diversified farm is based on high productivity, valuable products, and intensive management. Livestock producers who wish to capitalize on beneficial interactions and reap the financial benefit of multiple marketable products should consider silvopasture, which is the management of timber, forage, and livestock on a single site.

Silvopasture is the most common agroforestry system in the Southeast. It is designed to produce high quality and high-value timber while improving the pasture environment for livestock. Unmanaged woodland grazing does not fall into this category; timber, forage, and livestock must all be manipulated in a true silvopasture.

The products silvopastures produce include livestock, timber, and potentially pine straw (baled and sold to the landscaping industry), hay, and hunting leases. Whether you are beginning

with an existing woodland or pasture, an efficient and well-designed system from the start will yield the greatest benefits, both from a management and an economic perspective.

What does a silvopasture look like? In the Southeast, cattle and goats represent the most common livestock species and Southern pines, including loblolly (*Pinus taeda*) slash (*Pinus elliottii*) and longleaf (*Pinus palustris*) are the timber species of choice. Silvopasture systems are typically designed with closely-spaced double or triple rows of pine trees with wide alleyways of forage between the pines. High-value timber is produced through regular management of trees, including thinning and pruning. A common concern is the damage animals can cause to newly-planted trees. It is important to protect young trees with fencing or by excluding cattle until trees reach a safe size, but hay can still be harvested during this stage.

Besides multiple income streams, benefits of silvopas-

ture include increased wildlife habitat, water quality, and soil conservation. Visually, many people find silvopastures beautiful. Shade from trees reduces heat stress for grazing animals. The familiar sight of cattle crowded under the canopy of a single, large oak tree is the opposite of how animals behave in a silvopasture, because shade and forage are always nearby. Forage production benefits from the dispersal of animal waste-based nutrients. A rotational

grazing system works well in a silvopasture. Livestock managers who are interested in increasing productivity of rotational grazing systems while producing high-quality timber should consider silvopasture as a management option.

Emily Stutzman Jones is a PhD student in Auburn's School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. If you are currently practicing silvopasture, or would like to talk to her about silvopasture resources, email her at eas0018@auburn.edu.



Cattle grazing among pines in a silvopasture. Photo courtesy of Emily Stutzman Jones

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 4)

neighborhoods throughout Russell County. Cynthia McKinney, BECO's Executive Director, says "Whether you're a casual backyard gardener or a full-time farmer, you can help." No quantity is too small and donating is easy.

Even if you don't have a garden, there are other ways you can help, including:

- Donate gardening tools and supplies
- Help collect/glean, prepare and/or

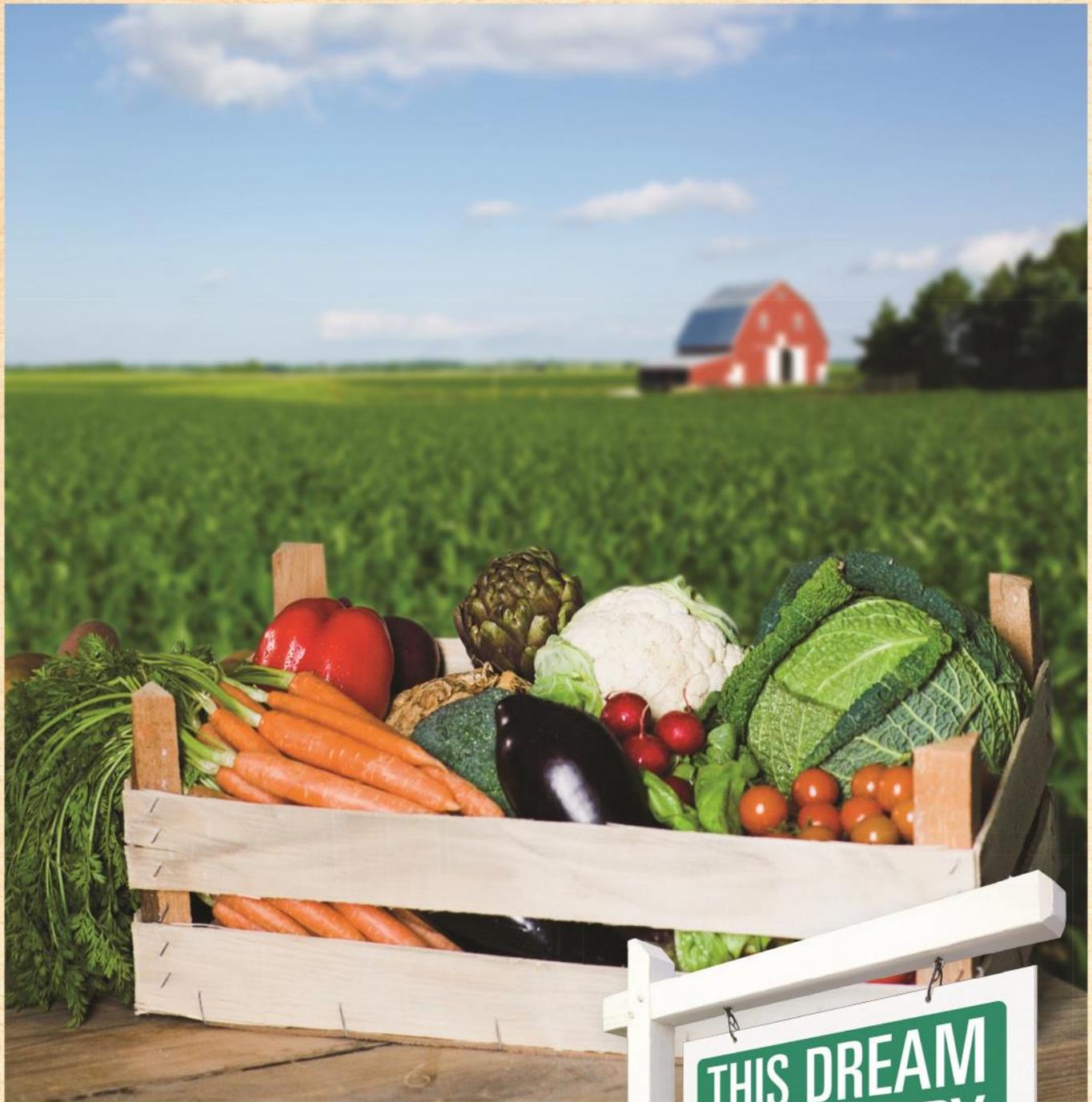
distribute produce to those in need

- Encourage city/county officials and private citizens to make vacant or unused land available for community gardens
- Educate yourself on the issues and advocate for hunger relief in your community.

"There is no single cause for the existence of food deserts, and there is no single solution," says McKinney,

"but there are opportunities for everyone to do something." Home gardeners, farmers, schools, church groups, youth groups, community organizations, and area businesses can all help make a difference for in the lives of their neighbors who experience hunger or the threat of hunger.

If you are interested in joining BECO's efforts to fight hunger, contact them at 334-855-0383 or beyond_expectations_outreach@aol.com for more information.



First South Farm Credit, building the bridge to coordinate retail agriculture and credit opportunity. First South's mission is to provide credit and credit opportunity for young, beginning and small farmers in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The new generation of retail agriculture is supported by farmers markets, community supported agriculture and other direct to consumer marketing options. First South Farm Credit supports the continued improvement of retail agriculture and non-traditional agriculture through the First South Young, Beginning and Small Farmer Credit Program and the First South marketing plan to identify and coordinate with the new generation of retail farming.

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DEADLINE APPROACHES FOR HEALTH CARE ENROLLMENT, WHILE GROUPS PUSH TO CLOSE ALABAMA'S "COVERAGE GAP"

On March 31, 2014, the open enrollment period for health care coverage under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) will end. According to Alabama Arise, more than 600,000 uninsured Alabamians could gain health insurance coverage under the ACA.

If you don't currently have health insurance, or if you have insurance you're dissatisfied with, see the box at right for more information.

Studies show that rural Americans are the most in need of health care, and are also the least likely to have health insurance. Rural folks, according to the Center for Rural Affairs, have less access to health care providers and greater rates of disability and chronic diseases. Also, because rural people are more likely to be self-employed or employed by small businesses, they are less likely to have employer-provided health care benefits, and more likely to be underinsured or uninsured for longer periods of time.

So you would think that the ACA's expanded health insurance coverage opportunities would greatly benefit rural Alabamians. While in many cases it will, there are many Alabamians who will not be able to take advantage of this increased access to health care coverage, because they fall into what is called a coverage gap. That is, they earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but they earn too little to qualify for the Health Insurance Marketplace tax credits, which make health insurance more af-

fordable.

It is estimated that anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 Alabamians fall into this coverage gap – Alabamians who could gain vital health coverage if Governor Bentley were to opt to expand Medicaid. The ACA provided measures to expand the eligibility requirements for Medicaid, closing the coverage gap, but it was up to each state to decide whether to expand their Medicaid program or not. Twenty-five states, including Alabama, refused

to expand Medicaid, turning away funding from the federal government that would cover the additional costs.

The states who refused were more likely to be rural states, like Alabama, so the coverage gap is disproportionately affecting rural folks – those who, as mentioned before, are the ones most in need of affordable health care coverage.

This isn't a done deal – it is still possible for Governor Bentley to reverse course and expand Medicaid, closing the coverage gap and making affordable health care coverage accessible to many more working folks throughout the state.

The Save OurSelves (SOS) Movement for Justice and Democracy has started a petition drive for Governor Bentley to expand Medicaid, and hopes to collect over 10,000 signatures by May 23, 2014. The signatures will be presented to the Governor at a rally at the State Capitol on May 31. SOS is a coalition of 32 organizations in Alabama fighting to protect basic fundamental

rights for all Alabamians including health, education, the right to vote, economic justice, and labor rights, among others.

Read more about health care reform at: www.cfra.org or www.alarise.org.

To read more about SOS's efforts and to download a copy of the petition, go to www.focalfocal.org/?p=1303. For more information contact FOCAL at 334-262-3456.



Photo credit: Flickr user 401(k)2012

Thanks to Dollie Hambrick, Jim Carnes, and MJ Ellington at Alabama ARISE, and Deborah Thomas, Tee Barnes, and Sophia Bracy-Harris at FOCAL for their help with this article.

The part can never be well unless the whole is well. — Plato

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I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. — Fannie Lou Hamer

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Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. — Martin Luther King, Jr.

OFF-BOTTOM (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 1)

are Gulf oysters through and through,” writes Rowan Jacobsen, who runs The Oyster Guide Website and whose food commentary has been carried by The New York Times, Newsweek and numerous food publications. “The difference is, they are farmed, and, apparently, that is enough to turn a Gulf oyster into a Northeast oyster.”

That last sentence speaks volumes about the irony that has long characterized Gulf Coast oysters.

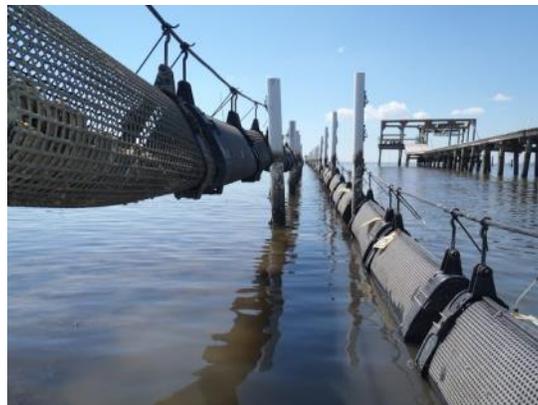
The Gulf Coast has always been known as the Fertile Crescent of Seafood, especially oysters. Some 23 million pounds — \$82.5 million worth — of oysters were harvested from Gulf waters in 2008, representing roughly 90 percent of the U.S. harvest. Here’s the irony: Even though the region produces the overwhelming share of U.S. oysters, it only generates about 73 percent of the total value.

The region’s oyster industry has long

functioned as a commodity market, with most harvested oysters taken to shucking houses, opened, and the meat extracted and packed in containers, according to Dr. Bill Walton, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System aquaculture specialist and Auburn University professor of aquaculture and fisheries who located to the Gulf Coast in 2009 to help resolve this longstanding irony.

Until recently, the Gulf has never had much success with farm-raised oysters capable of fetching high prices. The prevailing characteristics of Gulf waters are partly to blame. While providing ideal conditions for rapid oyster growth, they also contribute to fouling, damage from aquatic organisms such as algae and barnacles that prevent Gulf oysters from being sold as boutique oysters. Spawning conditions in Gulf water also contribute to thinner, more watery oyster meat.

Off-bottom farming resolves these



Oyster bags at different heights along a longline system. Photo credit: Bill Walton

issues. Raising these oysters in mesh containers above the seafloor not only eliminates burial in sediment but also, by frequently exposing them to air, protects the oysters from fouling. Shell shape, appearance, and product consistency are improved too. The oysters also are able to feed generously off single-celled algae called phytoplankton, all within the bounds of Mother Nature.

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LOAN FUND RECEIVES NEW MONEY TO FUND FOOD-RELATED BUSINESSES

By Mary Ellen Judah

In an effort to further promote economic growth in Huntsville, the North Alabama Revolving Loan Fund (NARLF) has created The Huntsville Fund to provide loans to small businesses and local entrepreneurs locating in the City of Huntsville. The Fund, which was established with a \$250,000 gift from the City of Huntsville’s Community Development Department, is available to provide financing ranging from \$2,500 to \$25,000 for start-up costs, inventory purchases, working capital and equipment purchases.

The Huntsville Fund is the second fund capitalized by NARLF since its formation in 2013 when they announced the creation of The Hiatt Fund which is de-

What is a revolving loan fund?

A revolving loan fund (also called micro-enterprise or microcredit) is a central pool of money from which small loans are made, generally to people who don’t qualify for traditional loans.

Revolving loan funds often have a larger goal of stimulating community development and/or promoting economic empowerment.

signed to provide capital to businesses that support a local food economy such as farmers, producers, small local stores and restaurants. Eligible applicants also include non-food related business that locate in underserved communities or support the creation and/or retention of jobs. To date, The Hiatt Fund has made loans totaling \$63,000 to food related businesses in north Alabama.

NARLF was designed to address a need for capital that is currently being unmet by traditional lending sources. NARLF has more flexibility in its lending decisions allowing them to make loans to start-up businesses or those looking for smaller amounts of capital that typically

might not be able to access conventional financing. This flexibility coupled with sound business practices allows NARLF to honor the social investment goals of its funders while still being good stewards of these investments.

NARLF’s business plan is unique in that it provides business technical assistance to its borrowers in addition to financing. NARLF staff can provide individual assistance with accounting, bookkeeping and cash flow management and referrals to other groups providing more business specific technical assistance. Not only does this help strengthen the borrower’s ability to repay the loan; but it also provides additional tools to the borrower promoting steady growth and business stability.

NARLF is currently accepting applications for both The Huntsville Fund and The Hiatt Fund. Interested parties may contact Mary Ellen Judah at (256) 534-0075 or mjudah@neighborhoodconcepts.org.

OFF-BOTTOM (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 8)

What emerges is a sustainable, environmentally product that with all the hallmarks of premium-priced boutique oysters.

Gulf Coast farmer Cullan Duke just completed his first season and plans to have his first large harvest of oysters, which he has dubbed Isle Dauphine Oysters, next fall. Duke is farming his oysters in waters just inside the western end of Dauphin Island, near an area known as Katrina Cut, the breach left by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Duke believes his farm, protected by Dauphin Island to the south, nourished by the rich estuarine waters from the north, and washed by salty water flowing in from the nearby Gulf of Mexico, produces oysters with a unique taste or merroir. He is confident that this unique taste will earn the enduring admiration of oyster connoisseurs.

Both Crockett and Duke agree that federal and state requirements associated with farming oysters are among the biggest challenges associated with off-bottom farming. Aspiring Alabama oyster farmers also must acquire private oyster riparian rights either through the purchase of waterfront property or by leasing from someone who already has secured these rights.

Marketing and distribution issues are added challenges. Oyster harvesters are required to sell their product only through licensed shellfish processors and dealers. The fact that only a handful of processors in Alabama are licensed to handle oysters destined for the half-shell market prompted Duke to organize a new processor/dealer, The Mobile Oyster Company, focused on handling his specialty Isle Dauphine Oysters.

Being vertically integrated — having the farming, harvesting, processing and marketing of these oysters under one roof

— enables Duke's company not only to maintain complete quality control but also to sell directly to restaurants or other consumers.

Duke credits the support and encouragement he's received from Crockett, Walton and other Alabama Extension and Auburn University experts.

"Working together, we're getting this new industry off the ground," he says. "The oysters are excellent, and the market is there — and there's always a market for excellence. Walton notes that oyster farming creates new opportunities for families on the coast to keep working on the water, but that the farms are hard work; "It's enough for a family to make a decent living, but there isn't so much to be made that we'll see foreign investors come in."

Of course, says Walton, "Oyster lovers can do their part and ask for locally raised oysters when they go out to their favorite restaurants and raw bars."

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FOOD POLICY BRIEFINGS—UPDATES ON STATE AND FEDERAL FOOD POLICY

State — SB 287: Tax on Groceries

- This bill, sponsored by Senator Gerald Dial (R-Lineville), would end the state's 4 percent sales tax on groceries and increase the sales tax on other items by 1 percentage point to replace the lost education revenue. The bill would phase in the changes over four years and would not require a public vote.
- According to Kimble Forrister, executive director of the Arise Citizens Policy Project, SB 287 would negate many low-income Alabamians' grocery tax savings by increasing the cost of everything else they buy. Items like clothes, toiletries and school supplies would be subject to a higher sales tax under the plan. "We're basically replacing one regressive tax with another regressive tax," Forrister said. "The best way to approach a regressive tax is to balance it out with a progressive tax."
- Forrister commended Dial for drawing attention to Alabama's status as one of only four states with no tax break on groceries. But a better way to replace the revenue from the grocery tax, Forrister said, is found in HB 130, sponsored by Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery.
- Alabama's tax system requires low- and middle-income families, on average, to pay twice the share of their incomes in state and local taxes that the richest Alabamians pay, according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. Sales taxes are the biggest driver of that gap, because low-income families must devote more of their household budget to food, clothes and other necessities subject to those taxes.
- More information at www.arisecitizens.org.

(Thanks to Carol Gundlach and Chris Sanders at Arise Citizens Policy Project for this update.)

State — SB 159: A Bill Relating to Cottage Food Production

- This bill, introduced by Senators Rusty Glover and Bill Hightower (both of Mobile County), is progressing through the legislative process with a lot of support.
- SB 159 would expand the rights of Alabamians to produce and sell "cottage food." Cottage food is non-potentially hazardous foods produced in a home kitchen that is not inspected by the state department of public health. Cottage food laws allow small-scale cottage food producers to sell food produced in their homes, without needing to obtain costly health department permits or licenses.
- According to proponent Barbara Parsons, "If passed this law will give us more options for healthy food choices for our families, and will create jobs in this hard economic time. Farmers will have additional venues in which to sell their produce, as Cottage Food Producers are encouraged to Buy Local. This is win/ win for Alabama on so many levels."
- An agreement between the Farmers Market Authority and the Alabama Department of Public Health in 2009 already allows certain cottage foods (including breads, cookies and cakes, jams and jellies, relishes, and other products) to be sold at state-authorized farmers markets and civic events, provided that they are labeled as having been produced in a home kitchen.
- SB159 would expand the ADPH/FMA agreement, so that cottage foods could also be sold to consumers directly from producers' homes.
- More information by searching "Alabama Cottage Food Law Information" on Facebook.

(Thanks to Barbara Parsons for this update.)



Photo credit: Marilyn Evans

Federal — HR 2415 / SR 1182 : The Treat and Reduce Obesity Act:

- This bill is co-sponsored by Representative Mo Brooks (AL 5th Congressional District), at the urging of the Alabama Dietetic Association's North Alabama District President Betsy Laury and Treasurer Jodi Valdez.
- The bill aims to effectively treat and reduce obesity in older Americans by increasing Medicare beneficiaries' access to qualified practitioners. Brooks' co-sponsorship is landmark because he recognizes that the bipartisan bill is fiscally sound and has promise to clinically and economically tackle the obesity epidemic.

(Thanks to Anita Daniel at the Food Bank of North Alabama for compiling this update.)

Make your voice heard! At the federal level:

You can weigh in on this and other bills by contacting your legislators in Congress. Find their contact information at www.govtrack.us/congress/members/AL.

Make your voice heard! At the state level:

You can contact your state legislators to weigh in on these and other bills — you can find contact information at www.legislature.state.al.us/misc/zipsearch.html. The 2014 legislative session is expected to conclude in early April.

UPDATES FROM REGIONAL FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Birmingham Jefferson Food Policy Council:

The BJFPC is currently restructuring and will be setting goals for this year and beyond in their March meeting.

River Region Food Policy Council:

The RRFPC hosted a number of events in fall 2013, including an urban crop mob (in partnership with ASAN) at Common Ground Ministry's community garden; free screening of *Eating Alabama*; two community listening sessions; and many other public events.

The RRFPC has been conducting food surveys around the community, as part of a larger community food system assessment – a comprehensive data snapshot of their tri-county (Autauga, Elmore and Montgomery) food system.

The community food system assessment is the RRFPC's focus in the spring and summer of 2014. They will be hosting a series of community planning sessions, and partnering with a number of local groups (governmental and nonprofit) to complete the report.

If you want to get involved, you can participate by: contributing to the online discussion; coming to any of the RRFPC's regularly scheduled meetings; and/or taking the food survey. All these things can be accessed via the RRFPC website, www.riverregionfood.org

Next planning session for the community food assessment is Wednesday, March 12 from 4-5 pm in the EAT South office at 723 N. Perry Street (the old Landmark Signs building)

North Alabama Food Policy Council:

The NAFPC's Governance and Education Committees are working together on the 2014 Education Action Plan for use at a full membership meeting to be scheduled later this year. The 2014 Education Action Plan will build on the results from the four Local Food Dialogues held in Huntsville, Rainsville, Muscle Shoals, and Cullman in 2012-13. If you are interested in participating, please contact Anita at adaniel@fbofna.org.

Also, since last spring the NAFPC has been working with the City of Huntsville's Planning Department on a proposed zoning ordinance amendment for Urban Agriculture. The amendment would update urban agricultural uses in Huntsville, including farmers' markets, community gardens, and urban farms.



RRFPC's October crop mob at Common Ground Ministry's community garden in Montgomery. Photo courtesy RRFPC.

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning — getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.

— Ella Baker, 1969

ASAN NEEDS SURVEY RESULTS

Big thanks to the nearly 100 of you who took the time to fill out our Needs and Priorities Survey this winter! We received some critical feedback that we will use in crafting our programs and priorities in 2014 and beyond.

Surveys came from folks scattered all across the state. Over 75% of people said they were either in a rural area or a small town. Over half of the respondents were farmers.

We synthesized the survey responses and got further feedback from ASAN members at a January members' dinner in Mobile. Ultimately, the top needs/priorities expressed, in no particular order, were:

1. Building a community statewide for sustainable agriculture
2. Agricultural training and technical support
3. Access to capital for farmers
4. Marketing and business management training
5. Consumer education and outreach
6. Local/sustainable food processing, aggregation, and infrastructure
7. New and beginning farmers

Thank you again, to everyone who gave voice to their thoughts, needs, and experiences in the survey.

Check out page 13 for some of the ways you can help us translate your priorities into action!

Like ASAN on Facebook!

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ALL HANDS ON DECK — ASAN NEEDS YOUR HELP!

ASAN is a network – that is, we are the sum total of all the connections and interconnections of those who make us up. Our power is in those connections, and in the wealth (material, intellectual, cultural, and otherwise) that we invest and reinvest in them.

We need your help! We've got big plans for 2014, but we can't accomplish these things without *substantial* help from our members and supporters – ie you!

This year we hope to deepen our efforts to build a community for sustainable agriculture in Alabama (see needs survey results on page 11). One way we'll do that is to create more ways for ASAN members and supporters to get involved with our work – and at the same time, with one another.

Keep an eye out for announcements about local gatherings, where we hope to spark a conversation about how we can support our members' organizing at a local and regional (“chapter”) level, not just statewide.

If you're interested in pitching in in the meantime, here are a few ideas:

1. Join! Renew! Donate!
2. Serve in a working group! See info at right.

3. Tell your friends, neighbors, and customers about ASAN! Let us know if you'd like to hand out ASAN materials at your market booth, in your CSA boxes, or at other events/festivals!
4. Share your wisdom and passion with the rest of our network! Host or participate in our Regional Forums, crop mobs, and other events. Write a newsletter article or suggest a topic for a profile.
5. You tell us! What skills/resources do you have that you want to share?



Contact Alice at alice@asanonline.org or at 256-743-0742.

BE A PART OF A WORKING GROUP!

Food Guide Working Group:

We've published several Local Food & Farm Guides in the past few years, covering the Huntsville, Birmingham, and Mobile/Gulf Coast areas. We are ramping up this year to publish a full-on statewide guide, and *we need your help!* The more help we get from each region, the more comprehensive and useful the Guide will be!

The Food Guide Working Group will:

- Conduct research to collect information on farms, markets, restaurants, and other businesses to include in the Guide
- Recruit and coordinate other volunteers helping with research
- Connect with potential advertisers/sponsors, both for individual regional sections and statewide
- Coordinate distribution of the printed Guide

Regional Food & Farm Forums Working Group:

If you were able to attend one of 2013's Regional Food and Farm Forums, you know how great they were – we need your help in 2014 to make them even better!

The Regional Food & Farm Forums Working Group will:

- Coordinate planning of the Regional Food and Farm Forums this fall, including program (topics and facilitators), host sites, food, registration, and logistics
- Connect with potential sponsors and exhibitors
- Coordinate publicity for the events



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Aliza and Timothy Cummings
The Gathering Place

NEWS FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS

Aliza and Tim Cummings of the Gathering Place Farm have moved their operation from Jacksonville, AL, to Fox, AR. Though we share in their excitement for this next step in their farm business and their lives, they will be missed here in Alabama.

The folks at the Tune Farm Incubator Farm are thrilled to welcome Will and Liz Doonan on as the program's new mentor farmers. Will and Liz moved their operation, Heron Hollow Farm — along with a toddler, some dogs, and a menagerie of farm animals — to the Incubator Farm in Falkville in January.

CLASSIFIEDS & RESOURCES

Cjae Miske is reaching out to anyone who would be interested in being part of a collective, cooperative farming operation on her 14 acres in Athens. She is looking to start a conversation with anyone who has a desire to “grow for profit as well as community.” Contact Cjae at miskecj@yahoo.com.

George Koulianos is starting a city-supported farmers market on Thursday afternoons at Medal of Honor Park in West Mobile. The market will run from mid-May until late June, tentatively. Any interested vendors please contact him at gkoulian@bellsouth.net or 251-438-4200.

The Bay Area Food Bank is recruiting a Community Garden and Gleaning Coordinator through the VISTA program. The Coordinator will develop and strengthen relationships within the Bay Area Food Bank Community Garden Network and with local farmers. He/she will also design templates for establishing school gardens and a food forest project. Applications are due by March 24. Job begins May 19. For more information visit www.bayareafoodbank.org/AboutUs/JobOpportunities.aspx.

These two sections appear in every newsletter and feature updates both personal and professional, on ASAN members and friends: anything from a new farm, to a new baby.

They make existing resources known to others, and help spread the word for those looking to connect.

Connecting people in this, the barest-bones of ways, we hope to provide a jumping-off point for folks to connect on their own in deeper ways.

Have something you want us to publish? Get in touch at alice@asanonline.org or (256) 743-0742.

UPCOMING EVENTS

More details on all of these events (and more!) at www.asanonline.org/events.

- Mar 4 – **Food Entrepreneur Workshop**, Huntsville. *Featuring Giles McDaniel and Kevin Kilburn of the Shoals Entrepreneurial Center. Cost \$20, 6-8pm. 4:30pm.*
- Mar 4 – **Introduction to Gardening Workshop**, Spanish Fort. *Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm. Cost \$25, 10am-12pm.*
- Mar 4 – **Annie's Project**, Opelika. *First course in a 6-week training series for farm and ranch women. Cost is \$50 for whole series. 5:30-8:30pm.*
- Mar 6 – **Hydroponic Gardening Workshop**, Spanish Fort. *Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, cost \$25, 10am-12pm.*
- Mar 6 – **Wild and Foraged Dinner**, Mount Laurel. *Collaboration between Stones Throw Bar & Grill and Coosa Riverkeeper, locally and wild-sourced. Cost \$65.*
- Mar 8 – **Organic Pest Management Workshop**, Theodore. *Hosted by the Bay Area Food Bank, with ACES Entomologist Ayanava Majumdar. Free, 1-4pm.*
- Mar 8 – **Fermentation Workshop Series**, Hartselle. *First in a series, hosted at Happy Heart Market by Lindsay Whiteaker (Harvest Roots Farm) and Liz Meyer (Heron Hollow Farm).*
- Mar 8 – **Peer to Peer High Tunnel Workshop Series**, Eufaula. *First in a series of hands-on workshops lasting through August, all hosted at S&B Farms.*
- Mar 9 – **Canning Workshop**, Birmingham. *Monthly workshop hosted by Manna Market. 3:00-*
- Mar 11 – **Intro to CSAs**, Spanish Fort. *Free class all about what CSAs are, how they work and how to join one. 11am-1pm, hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm.*
- Mar 11 – **Annie's Project**, Opelika. *(See Mar 4)*
- Mar 11 – **Living Landscapes: Mushroom Session**, Cullman. *ACES workshop about shiitake mushroom cultivation. Take home a small piece of inoculated log. Cost \$10, 6:00-8:30pm.*
- Mar 11 – **Saving the Family Farm/Forest**, Oneonta. *ACES workshop on estate planning, estate tax, trusts, and family successional planning. Free, 6-8pm.*
- Mar 12 – **Homegrown Fruit Workshop**, Tuscumbia. *Hosted by ACES. Free, 1-3pm.*
- Mar 13 – **Herb and Container Gardening Workshop**, Spanish Fort. *Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, cost \$25, 10am-12pm.*
- Mar 13 – **Traditional, Raised-Bed, and Container Gardening Workshop**, Foley. *Hosted by ACES. Free, 10am-12pm.*
- Mar 14 – **Symposium on Child Hunger: Closing the Hunger Gap**, Huntsville. *Free event convening civic, business, and education leaders. 8:45am-1pm, includes networking lunch.*
- Mar 15 – **Permaculture in Action Workshop**, Citronelle. *Hosted by Middle Earth Healing and Learning Center. Cost \$35, 9:30am-3:00pm.*

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If you're interested in making a larger donation to ASAN, or have any other questions, contact info@asanonline.org or (256) 743-0742.

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 PO Box 2127, Montgomery, AL 36102.

Or you can pay online:
<http://asanonline.org>

UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 14)

Mar 15 – **Tractor and Small Engine Maintenance Workshop**, Hartselle. Hosted by Rosita's Farm.

Mar 18 – **Strawberry Jam Canning Workshop**, Spanish Fort. Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, cost \$25, 10am-12pm.

Mar 18 – **Annie's Project**, Opelika. (See Mar 4)

Mar 18 – **Traditional, Raised-Bed, and Container Gardening Workshop**, Evergreen. Hosted by ACES. Free, 6-8pm.

Mar 20 – **Kids Gardening Workshop**, Spanish Fort. Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, cost \$25, 9-11am.

Mar 20 – **Farm to Table Lunch**, Spanish Fort. Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, 11am-12:30pm.

Mar 22 – **Fruit Tree Planting Workshop**, Mobile. Free workshop hosted by the Bay Area Food Bank, 9am-12pm.

Mar 22 – **Peer to Peer High Tunnel Workshop Series**, Eufaula. (See Mar 8)

Mar 22 – **Spring Forum: Fencing, Forages, and Best Management Practices**, Hazel Green. Hosted by ACES. Free, 8:30am-1:30pm.

Mar 25 – **Annie's Project**, Opelika. (See Mar 4)

Mar 27 – **Canning Workshop**, Spanish Fort. Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm, cost \$25, 10am-12pm.

Mar 29 – **Real Food: Focus on Ferments Workshop**, Citronelle. Hosted by Middle Earth Healing and Learning Center, 9am-1pm, cost \$35.

Mar 29 – **Family Farm and Fleece Day**, Huntsville. Hosted by the Tennessee Valley Women in Ag, featuring kids' activities, demonstrations, vendors, and more. 9am-5pm, free.

Apr 1 – **Market Manager Food Safety Training**, Tuscaloosa. Hosted by ACES. Free, 1-3pm.

Apr 1 – **GAP Training**, Tuscaloosa. Hosted by ACES, 9am-12pm.

Apr 5-6 – **1st Annual Tennessee Valley Farm Tour**. More details to follow.

Apr 6 – **Paleo Diet Workshop**, Birmingham. Monthly workshop hosted by Manna Market. 3:00-4:30pm.

Apr 8 – **Lactofermentation Workshop**, Talladega. Hosted by ACES. Free, 10am-12pm.

Apr 8 – **Food Safety Training for Growers**, Tuscaloosa. Hosted by ACES, 1-3pm.

Apr 10 – **Traditional, Raised-Bed, and Container Gardening Workshop**, Monroeville. Hosted by ACES. Free, 6-8pm.

Apr 12 – **Earth Day at Hays Nature Preserve**, Huntsville. Children's activities, vendors/exhibitors, plant giveaway, and more. Free, 10am-2pm.

(Continued on page 16)

ASAN

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Montgomery, AL 36102

Coming to the wrong person? Email alice@asanonline.org to unsubscribe your address. Thanks!

What do YOU want to read about? Send us your ideas or suggestions for future features!

*healthy farms,
healthy foods,
healthy communities.*

UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 15)

Apr 15 – **Naturally Smart Gardener: Garden-to-Table Workshop**, Mobile. Hosted by ACES. Cost \$20, includes dinner. Registration required. 5:30-8:30pm.

Apr 19 – **Backyard Composting Workshop**, Tuscaloosa. Hosted by the Druid City Garden Project, 9-11am.

Apr 19 – **Peer to Peer High Tunnel Workshop Series**, Eufaula. (See Mar 8)

Apr 26 – **Practical Ranch Management Workshop**, Moulton. Hosted by ACES, 8:30am-2:30pm.

Apr 26 – **Earth Day at the**

Gardens, Birmingham. Displays, demos and activities about gardening and eating well. Free, 11am-4pm.

May 1 – **Growing and Cooking with Herbs**, Mobile. Hosted by Mobile County Master Gardeners. 9:30-11am.

May 3 – **Southern Makers**, Montgomery. Festival showcasing Alabama artists, chefs, brewers, craftsmen, and other makers.

May 4 – **Essential Oils Workshop**, Birmingham. Monthly workshop hosted by Manna Market. 3:00-4:30pm.

May 17 – **Free the Plants! Propagation Workshop**, Tuscaloosa. Hosted by the Druid

City Garden Project, 9-11am.

May 17 – **Peer to Peer High Tunnel Workshop Series**, Eufaula. (See Mar 8)

May 20 – **Naturally Smart Gardener: Wise Ways to Water**, Mobile. Hosted by ACES. Cost \$20, includes dinner. Registration required. 5:30-8:30pm.

Jun 5 – **CSAs Straight from Alabama Farms to Your Table**, Mobile. Hosted by Mobile County Master Gardeners. 9:30-11am.

Jun 21 – **Peer to Peer High Tunnel Workshop Series**, Eufaula. (See Mar 8)