



THE ALABAMA  
SUSTAINABLE  
AGRICULTURE  
NETWORK

# ASAN UPDATE

Spring 2016

Published Quarterly

## EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES IN ALABAMA AGRICULTURE: ORGANIC GRAINS

Grains can, very generally speaking, be defined as the seeds of

plants that are used for food. Most industries rely on narrower definitions, based on what the grains are to be used for – for example cereal grains (corn, oats, wheat, rye, sorghum, etc.), which are from the grass family, and oilseeds (canola, sunflowers, peanuts, soybeans, etc.). The umbrella term “small grains” refers to wheat, oats, rye, barley, and triticale.

Much of Alabama’s cropland is already devoted to growing grains, predominantly corn and wheat, as well as soybeans, peanuts, and hay. According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service’s Crop Production 2014 Summary, Alabama harvested 285,000 acres of corn in 2014, 225K acres of wheat, 475K acres of soybeans, 173K acres

*This is Pt. 6 of a series on niche market opportunities for Alabama growers. More on the series on pg. 8.*

of peanuts, and 750K acres of hay.

However, the market for organic grains is booming, with demand encompassing everything from animal feed for certified organic livestock production; to oilseeds for certified organic peanut oil, sunflower oil, and other oils; to organic grocery products like the granola and flours made by the Alabama company To Your Health Sprouted Flour; to seed for certified organic farms to use for cover cropping; and much more.

Not all grains perform well here: for instance Alabama’s winter is too short for hard wheat (winter or spring, red or white), the higher-gluten wheat that’s best suited for baking with yeast. However soft winter wheat (red or white), which is lower in gluten, higher in carbohydrates, and ideal for pastries and cakes, grows very well here. (Learn more about



Bois d’Arc Farms wheat anthers. Photo courtesy Bois d’Arc Farms.

different wheat varieties at <https://www.kingarthurfLOUR.com/flours/learn-more.html>.) Basically anything that can be grown conventionally here, can also be grown organically.

Grains can fit well into a traditional crop rotation in Alabama, because there are a variety of options that are grown in different seasons. Corn, soybeans, grain sorghum, millet, sunflowers, buckwheat, for example, can

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## DEADLINE APPROACHING FOR WORKING-FARM CONSERVATION PROGRAM

By the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, compiled by Katie Willis

The USDA’s Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) offers support to farmers and ranchers who actively manage, maintain, and expand certain conservation practices on their land – for

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## SUSTAINABILITY IN THE BLACK BELT

By Kayla Robinson

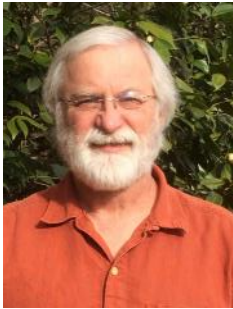


Black-Belt-raised leafy greens, aggregated, washed, cut, and packed at the Deep South Food Alliance food hub in Linden. Photo credit Alice Evans

Before the Civil War, Alabama’s Black Belt was home to vast amounts of wealth, due in large part to the rich black soil for which the region is named, which made the area ideal for

*(Continued on page 4)*

## LETTER FROM THE ASAN BOARD PRESIDENT



We've just finished what is no doubt the best year ever for ASAN and I'd like to recognize and thank a lot of folks who made it possible.

First, a huge thanks to Anne LaBelle, who, as Board President, provided great leadership, experience, and direction throughout the year. Her contributions will be felt for many years. She has been a great friend and role model and she will continue to work with us this year.

Next, thanks to the current and outgoing Board members. We have a great team of people who have been working hard. Our folks bring a variety of backgrounds, skills, experiences, and interests and share a passion for ASAN.

We've instituted term limits for Board members to ensure we've got new folks joining us each year and to avoid anyone burning out. Members who have rolled off this year will not be going far, though. We've created an Advisory Board

to keep them close to provide as much help and advice as they wish.

I'm really excited about the new members we have this year. They are bringing fresh ideas and perspective to our group and will be helping ASAN grow over the next several years.

And thanks to all of the members of ASAN who have pitched in throughout the year. So many have helped by attending, hosting, organizing, speaking, and contributing.

Finally, my biggest thanks go to Alice Evans, our Executive Director and the heart and soul of ASAN. Equipped with her laptop, cell phone, and hard-working car, Alice is everywhere in Alabama and she is the main reason for ASAN's success over the last several years.

What's up for 2016?

We want to continue building on the success of the Regional Food and Farm Forums, probably our most popular events. Our Graze Birmingham mixer/fundraiser was a huge success last year, pairing local restaurateurs and farmers for some great food and a great

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atmosphere. And beer. We will continue to use our newsletter and our website to keep in touch with each other and with important groups and events around Alabama.

I'm sure you have more ideas to build ASAN and a better Alabama. We need help doing it all. If you have ideas or suggestions, please let us know. And if you've time, please join in and help with some of our projects.

Sincerely,

Kirk Iversen  
ASAN Board President

### CONTRIBUTORS: SPRING 2016

**Kayla Robinson**, a Montgomery native, recently graduated from the University of Alabama with a bachelor's in Music Marketing and Business Communications.

**Trae Watson** is a native Birminghamer, artist, natural designer, and chair of the Red Mountain Makerspace co-op.

**Jayne Oates** lives in Notasulga and is the director of Farmscapes Solutions.

Thanks also to **Graydon Rust**, **Allison Stewart**, and **Michael LaBelle** for their contributions to the article on organic grains.

**Kirk Iversen** is ASAN's Board President and a traveling sometimes-soil-scientist with the NRCS. He lives in Auburn.

**Katie Willis** is a native of the Birmingham area with 9 years farming experience. She is ASAN's current intern.

**Alice Evans** is the Executive Director of ASAN. She is a native of Huntsville and currently resides in Birmingham.

### ABOUT ASAN:

The mission of the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network is to support conservation practices, families who grow and consume natural food and fiber, and the communities where they live. ASAN provides peer-to-peer education, training, and networking opportunities to our broad network of farmers, gardeners, food-based businesses, agricultural resource organizations, and community leaders. We are a membership-based organization that seeks to improve the lives of small farmers and rural and urban communities and make a positive impact on the state's environment and health.

We define sustainable agriculture as farming that supports families and communities while conserving natural resources. We embrace the breadth of overlapping ways — ecological, economic, social, historical, etc. — that together, we can build a more sustainable food system. Find out more at <http://asanonline.org>.

### ASAN BOARD OF DIRECTORS, 2016

**Skye Borden** (Secretary) — Montgomery

**Aisha Fields** — All African People's Development and Empowerment Project, Huntsville

**Kirk Iversen** (President) — Auburn

**Mary Latimore** — Houston-Latimore & Associates, Birmingham

**Jessica Norwood** — Emerging Changemakers Network, Mobile

**Graydon Rust** — Bois d'Arc Farm, Uniontown

**Amanda Storey** — Jones Valley Teaching Farm, Birmingham

**Lindsay Turner** — Druid City Garden Project, Tuscaloosa

**Charles Walters** (Vice President) — River Oaks Farm, Millbrook

**Myles Wright** (Treasurer) — Montgomery

**Karen Wynne** — Rosita's Farm / Crotovina, Inc, Huntsville

## JOIN US IN WELCOMING SIX NEW MEMBERS TO ASAN'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Six incredible folks joined ASAN's board at the start of the year — if you don't already know them, you need to!



Skye Borden is an environmental writer and consultant based out of her hometown of Montgomery. She also holds a law degree from Vermont Law School, where she focused on Environmental Law and Policy. Her first book, *Thirsty City*, about the roots of Atlanta's water crisis, was a finalist for the 2016

Reed Environmental Writing Award. She first got involved with ASAN in 2013 at a crop mob workday at RRBG Farm in Arton, and later that year hosted a Regional Forum at her family's hobby farm in south Montgomery County. She is the former coordinator of the River Region Food Policy Council, and brings valuable legal and policy experience to the ASAN board.



Aisha Fields lives in Huntsville and is the International Director of the All African People's Development and Empowerment Project (AAPDEP). (She is also an applied optical physicist and math teacher!) With AAPDEP she helps coordinate a variety of agricultural, educational, and community-based health care programs in Sierra Leone, West Africa, as well as in

Black communities throughout the US and Europe. AAPDEP's latest project is Zenzele Consignment, a consignment store in Huntsville which will generate income and provide a gathering space for AAPDEP. Aisha believes in sustainable development via self-reliance and community self-determination and sovereignty, values which she brings to ASAN's work here in Alabama. Aisha is the proud mother of three children.



Mary Latimore is a native and current resident of Birmingham, where since 1990 she has run a bookkeeping and business and financial consulting business, Houston-Latimore & Associates. She has served on the boards of the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama (FOCAL) and Alabama Arise. She was employed with FOCAL in the mid-2000s as part of

SRBWI's (Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative) asset development program, which is when she was first introduced to ASAN. She brings extensive financial knowledge to ASAN's board, which will serve both ASAN's internal operations, as well as help inform future programs/resources to help farmers manage their businesses for long-term success.



Graydon Rust is an agronomist at Bois d'Arc Farm in Perry County. He first got involved with ASAN at the Regional Food & Farm Forum in Linden, and loves the farmer-to-farmer networking and knowledge-sharing aspect of ASAN. He formerly worked at Spencer Farm in nearby Marion

Junction, and hopes to bring to the board "a familiarity with certified organic farming on both a small and large scale so that ASAN can continue to meet the opportunities and needs that organic farming presents in our state." Graydon is originally from Prattville, and studied history at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM).



Amanda Storey recently became the Executive Director of Jones Valley Teaching Farm in Birmingham (shifting from her previous role as Director of Partnerships. She is on the board of Pepper Place Market, the executive committee of Jefferson County's Collaboration for Health Equity, and the steering

committee of Lt. Governor Kay Ivey's End Child Hunger in Alabama Task Force. Amanda has previously worked at the Community Food Bank of Central AL, the United Way of Central AL, and Cooking Light Magazine. Amanda says she is guilty of posting too many photos on social media of her 4-year-old son, Martin Everitt, and 8-month-old daughter, Mae. She is inspired by story-telling, Dolly Parton, and Audre Lorde.



Karen Wynne is a soil scientist, organic farming consultant, and farmer (of mostly garlic, these days) at Rosita's Farm in Hartselle. She was also the original Executive Director of ASAN! She brings to the board the experience and wisdom she's gained from working with hundreds of new and beginning farmers from all backgrounds for

over ten years in the Southeast. These days she is especially passionate about helping sustainable farmers develop necessary business management skills, and is interested in seeing ASAN get more involved with policy. She splits her time between her home in Huntsville, her farm in Hartselle, and the driver's seat of her car, traveling to farms across Alabama and beyond.



## BLACK BELT (CONTINUED)

*(Continued from page 1)*

growing cotton, and to the exploitation of slave labor. However, over the years, factors including slavery and sharecropping, boll weevil attacks, and urbanization of cities, have left a negative effect on the region. Today, Alabama's Black Belt is the poorest region in Alabama with an approximated average of 26.6% of the population living below the poverty line.

The question now is: Can this once prosperous region regain (and more justly distribute) its wealth and can the living conditions of the inhabitants be improved? The answer is yes, but it's going to take some work.

First, just like in many other places, farmers and eaters need to rethink our approach to farming. In 1896, George Washington Carver received a job at Tuskegee Institute to instruct Black farmers how to farm better. It was during this work when Carver pioneered the idea of sustainability, even though the concept was not given a name at the time. The problem with the "conventional" or industrial method of farming is that the focus is on maximizing present production only. Sustainable agriculture not only focuses on current production, but on future production as well. Farming sustainably means that crops can continue to be produced, the farms can remain healthy, and farmers can continue farming and even pass their farms to future generations. Some sustainable practices that are currently utilized include using less fossil fuels, recycling nutrients, and adopting emerging technologies.

Secondly, farmers' training should include education in business, not just in farming. According to Natilee McGruder, the director of River Region Food Policy Council in Montgomery, Alabama, part of the problem with many Black Belt farmers — as with many farmers elsewhere — is that they do not operate their

farm like a business. Farmers often plant without knowing where their market is for their crops, and they avoid and miss out on cutting edge practices that would help their farms thrive. More education can help these farmers think more like businesspeople.

Additionally, the farmers need to have a relationship with the land and not just own it for show. As a result of heir-property ownership, prime Black Belt land is often placed in the hands of heirs that do not want any connection to their ancestors' land, which often results in absentee landownership, the land being unused, and/or non-farmers buying the land for other purposes besides farming. When land is owned by a farmer who lives there, that farmer has a relationship with the land based on close observations of his or her surroundings.

A 2009 study found that young adults from age 23-28 believed that landownership was important to their status, but had less desire than older age groups to purchase land. This belief among the younger generation stems from the older view that land is power; however, the younger generation lacks the knowledge of exactly why land is power. Through education, younger generations can understand that the land enables the production of food, whether fruits, vegetables, or livestock, and therefore enables survival. Education can encourage young people to develop a close relationship with land, and to develop familiarity in nature. This is important because the younger generation will be the ones to continue and carry out farming techniques.

Another opportunity for Black Belt farmers that will help sustain them and the landscape, is in the formation of cooperatives. After the Civil War, former slaves purchased land collec-



*A conversation at Grover and Sharon Robinson's farm in Gee's Bend, about engaging youth in agriculture, and about sustainable ways to generate modest profit from family land. Photo credit Alice Evans*

tively. Cooperatives were the foundation of Black-owned farms in Alabama and throughout the South, especially in with high populations of former slaves. Cooperatives over the years proved to be a great asset to farmers, especially in the Civil Rights movement. Many cooperatives have been dismantled due to hate crimes, institutional discrimination (past and present), and other reasons, but many persist.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) was first created in 1967 to help create and support farming cooperatives and credit unions, helping to build and sustain Black land security in an era of intense threats and backlash to Civil Rights. Today, FSC offers a variety of programs to help Black Belt farmers. Programs include training workshops on housing and environmental justice, assisting in the development of successful small farms and practicing sustainable agriculture, assisting with the legal and financial components of land ownership, educating farmers on their rights, and so much more. Cooperatives, as demonstrated by the FSC, act as a support system to other farmers, which is why more cooperatives should be established. The support of other farmers can help communities of farms thrive because, like Natilee McGruder said in an interview, "collectively, we're more powerful."

However, the revitalization of this once prosperous region is not solely in the hands and soil of Black Belt farmers, but in the hands of all Alabamians. First, all Alabamians should make themselves aware of the importance of organic farming and the importance of their local farms. Currently, Alabama farmers sell more crops to other states than in-state. However, the increased demand for crops in-state can help support the morale and the economy of the Black Belt region. The crops that are produced on Black Belt farms are essential to the well-being on the residents of the state of Alabama. Therefore, Alabamians should be more supportive of their local

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*NCAT-ATTRA's Rock Woods, leading a roundtable discussion on Recordkeeping for Profitability at the 2014 ASAN Regional Forum in Linden, photo credit Alice Evans*





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## ORGANIC GRAINS (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 1)

be considered spring and summer crops, while wheat, rye, oats, barley, and canola, are planted in the fall and harvested in the spring/early summer. Winter grains, especially, work VERY well in a typical corn/soybean/grain rotation.

Grains can also perform very well in rotation with livestock, as Windy Acres Farm in Orlinda, TN, has proven (see inset).

### Fertility:

Generally speaking, small grains need fertile, well-drained soils with high soil organic matter, since none of the small grains like “wet feet” for extended periods of time. Late spring rains can pose a major threat to grains in inadequately drained soils. Adequate lime as a source of calcium is critical, with 65% of CEC (cation exchange capacity) being calcium and 15% being magnesium.

Different grains have different fertility requirements. Corn is the most ravenous, requiring, depending on the harvest desired, more than 240# of nitrogen per acre. (Conventional wisdom has it that corn produces roughly 1 bushel per 1 pound N.) For wheat and barley, a standard figure is about 60# of N/acre. For organic production, fall applications of manure can easily supply these needs, along with many/most of the other fertility needs. Of particular importance is to ensure an adequate supply of trace minerals, the presence of which will guarantee (as much as possible) a healthy and HEAVIER harvest. In theory farmers are paid on bushels, but in practice they are paid on weight, so if your bushel of grain weighs 2#-4# more, then in effect you are making more per bushel than your neighbor.

### Seed:

Organic standards require that producers purchase any certified organic seed available, in the particular variety they are interested in. If there is no certified organic seed available for a certain variety, however, it's possible to purchase conventional seed as long as it is not genetically modified or treated with any products not allowed under organic production.

Many vegetable seed companies, such as Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, carry a limited supply of grain seed, both certified organic and not. There are also companies in Alabama that sell open-pollinated and heirloom varieties of grains in volumes suitable for small-scale production, for example Clemmons and Hamner Seed Company in Killen, AL (<http://clemmonshamnerseed.com>).

At the other end of the spectrum is Bois D'Arc Farms in Marion, which cultivates thousands of certified organic acres; the *smallest* unit they buy their seed in is 50-pound bags, on up to 2000-pound “super sacks.”

### Cultivation and Harvesting:

The biggest difference between organic and conventional production of grains is weed control. Corn, soybeans, and wheat are the most common crops grown in Alabama and since all of them have been genetically modified to be re-

### Spotlight: Windy Acres Farm – Orlinda, TN

Carney (at right) and Alfred Farris both grew up in Nashville, “back when it was small,” and started a farm in the early 1980s just west of the city, where they raised vegetables, corn, and Angus beef.

A few years later, troubled by the effects that industrial farming was wreaking on the landscape as well as human, animal, and environmental health on a national scale, they relocated to their current location in Robertson County, north of Nashville, and shifted to adopt organic and sustainable methods.

They began growing many of the grains they still grow today: soft roane wheat (a red variety), white corn, and Jubilee yellow corn for grits.

As followers of Sir Albert Howard, they began working towards a seven-year rotation that included grassfed British white beef cattle, and later sheep and some poultry as well. They had to fence all their pastures, a huge capital investment as well as an unusual move in their county, which had no other fenced-in pastures at that time.

They made their own roller crimper, which they use to turn their cover crops into green mulch, which fertilizes and acts as a weed barrier for the grain crop that will follow. They bought a refurbished old seed cleaner from a company in Illinois, so they could clean their harvested grains right there on the farm.

They raise buckwheat which is delicious and beloved by the bees, Big Bubba soybeans (which make fantastic tofu), as well as rye, hairy vetch, barley, and milo (grain sorghum). More about their farm and their story can be found at <http://windyacrestn.com/>.



sistant to various herbicides, they can simply be sprayed to control weeds. Other crops, like sunflowers, have been traditionally bred to have herbicide resistance as well. Organic producers can't use GMO seed or herbicides, and so instead

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L: Bois d'Arc Farms wheatfield, photo courtesy Bois d'Arc Farms, photo courtesy Bois d'Arc Farms. Top: Windy Acres Farm's homemade roller-crimper, photo credit Alice Evans.

## Spotlight: To Your Health Sprouted Flour Company – Fitzpatrick, AL:

About 12 years ago Peggy Sutton, driven by a resolve to take better care of herself and her family, developed a passion for pre-industrialized foodways. Among these is the tradition of harvesting grains that had naturally sprouted in the fields – which confers fabulous health benefits that are possible to replicate by sprouting grains at home.

The venture that is now To Your Health Sprouted Flour Company (or TYH) began with Peggy began baking for friends in her home kitchen, in 2005. Opportunities quickly arose to bake for local CSAs and co-ops, and retail outlets – so Peggy and her husband Jeff built a commercial kitchen, obtained a food processing license, and hired two part-time employees. In 2008 the company switched to all organic – and still sprouted! – grains and flours.

The company now produces around 50,000 pounds of flour each week, and employs 30 people in two Bullock County facilities (14,400 square-feet – a far cry from the home kitchen!). They have automated their sprouting process with custom machinery and a proprietary method of drying the sprouted grains to retain all the vitamins, minerals, and enzymes produced during sprouting.

While most of the grains TYH uses in its products currently come from the Midwest and Canada, they are deeply interested in buying local organic grains wherever possible, and want to foster increased organic grains production here in Alabama. Learn more at <https://healthyflour.com/>.

(Continued from page 6)

control weeds using a combination of cultivation, roll-down cover crops, closer spacing of plants to shade out weeds, and crop rotations that break weed cycles. Sunn hemp is one crop that can be planted prior to winter grains, which shades out weeds and eventually reduces weed pressure. (For more on sunn hemp visit <http://petcherseeds.com/>.)

Additionally, some crops like canola and sunflowers, when raised non-organically, may be sprayed with an herbicide to kill them after they have gone to seed. This makes the plants dry down more quickly and uniformly. Not only does this allow for an earlier harvest, but also gives less time for insects and birds to eat the seed before it can be harvested. Not having green matter also makes harvesting easier on equip-

ment. Organic producers can't use herbicides in this way, and simply have to wait for the plants to dry naturally. All the grains being discussed simply need a combine to harvest the seed heads. Provided the grain is not too wet/damp when harvested the farmer should be able to use a standard grain dryer to allow for relatively long term storage.

Depending on the end-use of the harvested grain, it will require varying degrees of cleaning to separate out plant matter and other foreign material from the grain. For instance, grain sold as livestock feed is allowed to contain a larger amount of foreign material than food-grade grain for human consumption, or grain for seed.

Seed cleaners in general are fewer and farther between than they once were – according to Carney Farris of Windy Acres Farm, there

used to be a seed cleaner in every county. Further complicating matters, seed cleaners that are used for conventional seed must be thoroughly deep-cleaned per organic protocol before they are allowed to be used for organic seed. So practically speaking, most organic seed requires a dedicated organic seed cleaner. Windy Acres has a seed cleaner on site, which they purchased from an Illinois



Top: Sprouted wheatberries, photo courtesy To Your Health Sprouted Flour Co.

company that refurbishes old seed cleaning equipment. "It's old technology," Carney says, "Mostly conveyors and screens and augers." Though she also says that if she were buying a new model, she'd get one with "top air," which blows chaff and other light debris off before the seed ever enters the rest of the cleaner.

Some combines are able to do some of the cleaning as they harvest. And some purchasers, especially of food-grade grain, have their own processing equipment in order to clean the grains up to food-grade standards – of course, the farmer ultimately pays for this in the form of a reduced selling price.

## Marketing:

Nationwide, the demand for organic grains in the United States is far outpacing the supply. We are currently importing a staggering amount of organic grain from Europe and Brazil. This has dropped the price somewhat, but as a general rule, organic grains are at least twice as valuable as conventional grains. As of February 2016, organic corn is going for around \$12/bushel whereas conventional corn is less than \$5/bushel. In fall of 2015, organic soybeans were over \$26 with conventional beans running somewhere around \$12/bushel.

Like with any other crop, it is important to get a handle on your market before you ever put a seed in the ground. There's nothing like having a

silo full of expensive, organic grain and no buyer to take it off your hands.

Food-grade outlets include companies like To Your Health (see inset), who add value to organic grains by sprouting, drying, and milling them

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Right: Windy Acres on-farm seed cleaning equipment, photo credit Alice Evans.

## ORGANIC GRAINS (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 7)

into flours and other products. There may also be outlets for direct sales through farmers markets or farm stands. Another possible channel is the growing micro-brewery and micro-distillery sector, including folks like Back Forty Brewing and High Ridge Spirits, who need high-quality grains to produce beer, whiskey, vodka, and other drinks. Brewers and distillers are typically very picky about the grain they purchase, with good reason, and also use less than you might expect.

Another option is for small producers to work on a contract basis, growing grains for larger local farmers who can then pool the harvest to access larger buyers. The risk with such an arrangement is that the small producer may not get their crop ready for harvest within the narrow window necessary for the purchase, leaving them with a field of grain and no buyer. This issue may be more avoidable in a co-operative arrangement, however, and would still allow multiple growers to pool their harvests to access larger markets.

Perhaps the best entry point for folks interested in getting started with organic

### About This Series

For Alabama farmers to prosper into the future, we need to look outside of the traditional crops that have been grown and sold in Alabama for generations. This series highlights new opportunities that Alabama farmers can pursue with a minimum of investment in land, equipment and capital.

Recap of the series so far: elderberries (Fall 2014), shiitake mushrooms, bananas, and blackberries, and garlic.

hindrance. Organic feed is more expensive than conventional anywhere, but especially in areas like Alabama where there are few or no farmers producing organic feed, the added cost to ship feed in from other regions is often enough to tip the scales away from profitability. Even as pricey as organic grain appears to be for the producer, organic meat is an

grains, is to grow feed for organic livestock producers. More and more people are wanting to raise organic meat and eggs, but the lack of a cost-effective source of organic feed is a huge

even more attractive market, if you have access to cost effective feed. (Of course certified organic meat production faces other barriers to growth than access to feed, notably a lack of good processing – but that’s another article altogether.)

The major hurdles to accessing certain markets are volume and processing, as alluded to above. However, especially if concerted efforts are made to build bridges in those areas, there’s no reason that Alabama farmers can’t grow to feed local, regional, and national (and international) demand.

ASAN is interested in helping to nurture the growth of the organic grains supply chain in Alabama, so if you are currently growing or interested in growing organic grains, please contact ASAN at [info@asanonline.org](mailto:info@asanonline.org) to let us know!

### Spotlight: MightyGrow Organics + High Ridge Spirits

In 2012 at the ASAN Food & Farm Forum in Orange Beach, Anne and Michael LaBelle met Jamie Ray, who was then the brew master for Back 40 Beer company. Jamie mentioned that he would love to brew an Alabama beer using Alabama rye, but lamented that there was no such thing to be found. Fast forward several months and Jamie, now the principal owner of High Ridge Spirits, Alabama’s first “legal” whiskey distiller, reached out to Michael to propose that he grow out some rye. Michael found some organic rye seed and got the crop planted in early December of 2013.

Michael says he “loved growing rye because it is pretty much ‘plant it and forget it.’ It was a BEAUTIFUL crop, lush and green and with NO weeds,” and was ready for harvest in early May of 2014. However, Michael’s neighbors, whose combine he was planning on borrowing for his rye harvest, were harvesting their wheat crop, which put Michael back two weeks on his harvest.

Michael says the quality of the harvest was not what he would have liked. (Turns out there is a little more to growing rye grain than “plant it and forget it”!) The folks at High Ridge were going to have some friends clean the grain and malt it, but they did not have the right equipment to do the additional cleaning, and according to Jamie, it became “a muddy mess and it was a failure.”

Michael says the experience was disappointing, but does show why proper equipment and good grain is critical for the end user. He says, “I would do it again, but I would want to pay more attention to my fertility program, soil testing and harvest arrangements.”



Bubba Hall and Michael LaBelle in a field of rye destined for Alabama whiskey, photo courtesy MightyGrow Organics

## BLACK BELT (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 4)

farms. Secondly, advocating a better public education system in the state that can benefit both the urban and the rural residents of Alabama. With the betterment of education throughout the state, young people will gain access to knowledge and ideas – both new and old – that could substantially

improve the vast rural area of the Black Belt.

Ultimately, the answer to revitalizing Alabama’s Black Belt region is through the implementation of sustainable agriculture. The future of this region is the responsibility of the entire state, of all our communities. Because the problems that plague the area have been affecting the region for

centuries, the downside is that any new ideas or practices that are implemented, will take years to show systemic, long-term effects. It is time to stop overlooking our problems and start encountering them head on, because the well-being of our local farmers and farms ensure the well-being of the entire state.



## EXPERIENCED GROWERS WANTED: HELP SAVE THE SAND MTN. SEED BANK

By Trae Watson

Within the first 60 seconds of meeting Alice Evans, she told me about Dove Stackhouse and Charlotte Hagood and their joint project, the Sand Mountain Seed Bank. I had just returned from meeting with the Muskogee Food Sovereignty Initiative in Oklahoma and expressed my interest in native crops. Alice told me about how the Seed Bank had traded some of their heirloom seeds with the Choctaw of Oklahoma so they could reclaim some of their heritage food crops they'd left behind when they were forcibly displaced to reservations via the Trail of Tears.

I also learned that Dove and Charlotte were in need of a way to inventory their stocks. That's when I was hooked. Little did I know that the rare seeds in Sand Mountain Seed Bank's collection were dying.

Dove and Charlotte started saving seeds individually more than four decades ago. They had been sharing seeds in Alabama through the Seed Savers Exchange, and finally met in person in 2000 at the SSAWG Conference. It was then that they realized that they didn't have enough years between them to grow out all the seeds they had been saving, so they launched the Sand Mountain Seed Bank, to get more people involved in growing out the seeds.

With the help of friends and fellow seed enthusiasts, Charlotte and Dove have been growing and saving the seeds, not only keeping the seedstock viable but adapting the varieties to Alabama's different climate zones.

Dove and Charlotte keep records of each plant's habitat, intent, trait selection, and cultivation techniques. If you know the traits that a seed was selected for and the purposes for which it was used, then you can perpetuate that purpose and keep its story alive. Furthermore, this work maintains genetic variety and preserves and cultivates varieties

with disease and pest resistance, which is critical to the health and survival of organic farms.

### Not Just Seeds But Stories

The Sand Mountain Seed Bank has been preserving our regional heritage, not just in the seeds themselves but in the human stories that come with each seed. This is where Charlotte really shines; she has been collecting seeds and their stories all her life, as her family had.

Dove and Charlotte's networking efforts have served countless elderly farmers and gardeners looking to pass on their stories and their crops before they themselves pass. As of late Dove and Charlotte have struggled to keep track of the overwhelming number of seeds and stories that they have collected. This is where the Red Mountain Makers come in.

Some context: the Red Mountain Makerspace (RMM) in Birmingham is built on the ideal of "open-source" — an open, collaborative platform for bottom-up innovation. RMM is a workspace, community center, classroom, and toolshed rolled into one. "Most people are conditioned by having to grow up, learn, live and work in environments that have been created for them from the top down," the RMM website explains. RMM "inverts this social construct, and instead empowers its members to create their own environment, grassroots style" — from furniture to lighting to workstations. Not altogether unlike seed saving.

Many makerspaces use an open-source wiki to keep track of their library of equipment and tools. When I met Dove and Charlotte for the first time at the ASAN Regional Forum in Mentone, I brought up the idea of adapting this wiki platform to catalog the Seed Bank's inventory. While Charlotte said she was



Above: Charlotte in front of one of the Seed Bank's refrigerators/freezers, photo credit Trae Watson. L: Dove speaking at the 4th Annual Seed Celebration (a benefit for the Seed Bank) in February in Huntsville, photo credit Alice Evans.

a Luddite, she didn't refuse the idea. James Nysten, Colin Brogan and I have been developing just such a tool, which could be used for other seed banks as well. This then would allow for seed libraries to request the seeds, so that local folks can grow them out and send them back to the bank for evaluation.

### In Need Of Growers

Ten students at U of A under Prof. David Meek have been logging the seed data, which tracks its growout deadline — that is, the deadline after which the saved seeds lose their ability to properly germinate. We have found most of them are overdue.

That's where we need your help. Sand Mountain Seed Bank's stores are beyond their deadlines and they require experienced and specialized growers who can evaluate growouts in isolation and recognize crossed varieties. If you have experience with specific plant types contact [whirlwindfarms4@gmail.com](mailto:whirlwindfarms4@gmail.com) to help save our living heritage.

*"Seeds have the power to preserve species, to enhance cultural as well as genetic diversity, to counter economic monopoly and to check the advance of conformity on all its many fronts." — Michael Pollan*

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## DEADLINE (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 1)

example, cover cropping, managed rotational grazing, diversified crop rotations, ecologically-based pest management, conservation buffer enhancement, composting, and transitioning to organic cropping or grazing systems. These practices allow farmers and ranchers to address the critical resource concerns in their watersheds or regions while also profitably producing food, fiber, and energy.

As the largest federal conservation program of its kind, CSP has close to 70 million acres currently in the program. This year, funding will allow for an additional 10 million acres to be added to the program. In Alabama this year there are nearly 100,000 acres available for new enrollments, with another 64,000 acres up for five-year renewal contracts.

### CSP Success Story

Alabama farmer Miguel Otero, with the help of his local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office, enrolled in CSP, which allowed him to expand upon his existing conservation

techniques and invest in developing new ones. CSP allowed Miguel to increase the productivity of his farm,



Top: CSP enrollee Miguel Otero on his farm near Dothan. Above: Miguel Otero's cattle, behind CSP-supported rotational grazing fencing. Right: Cover cropped pasture bisected into two paddocks with movable fencing. Photo credits Miguel Otero and Amelia Hines, courtesy the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

while still maintaining the integrity of his land, by reducing the financial investment required by some conservation practices.

Miguel utilizes an intensive rotational grazing program that helps ensure his pastureland is used efficiently. Rotational grazing distributes manure more evenly, which leads to improved nutrient cycling, greater carbon sequestration, and better forage. CSP also allowed Miguel to plant cover crops, which reduce erosion, improve soil health, and water quality, suppress weed pressures, and break pest cycles. These conservation practices not only benefit the environment, but strengthen his herd of cattle – and his farm business as a whole – as well.

### 2016 Enrollment and Renewal

Farmers and ranchers have until March 31 to complete the initial CSP application, which consists of a simple form asking for basic information regarding land ownership, type of production, and contact information. While applicants can sign up for CSP anytime throughout the year, those who miss the March 31 deadline will not be considered until 2017. All CSP contracts last for five years and are renewable; hence farmers already enrolled in CSP who signed contracts in 2012, must renew this year to remain in the program for the next five years (2017-21).

This year's sign-up deadline carries particular significance, as a major program overhaul is scheduled for 2017. In order for producers to enroll (or renew existing contracts) under

**Are you currently enrolled in CSP, or have you received support from CSP in the past?**

**We need you, to help ensure ongoing support of the program! If you would be willing to share your story, please contact ASAN at [alice@asanonline.org](mailto:alice@asanonline.org).**

CSP's existing structure, ranking process, and current conservation activities, they must adhere to the March 31 deadline.

One small change is being implemented in 2016, which benefits high-value, smaller acreage farms by increasing the previous minimum contract amount from \$1000

to \$1500. Moreover, the previous \$1,000 annual minimum was only available for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, whereas the new \$1,500 annual minimum is now available to all farmers. Hence the new range for CSP payments per farm per year is between \$1,500 and \$40,000.

### For More Information

To support farmers and ranchers and encourage their involvement in this important program, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) created *CSP Information Alert*, a step-by-step sign-up guide to the program with full enrollment details, including a complete list of all conservation activities that qualify for awards.

NSAC has also published the more detailed *Farmers' Guide to the Conservation Stewardship Program*, which includes enrollment guidance, key definitions, explanations of the ranking and payment system, and helpful hints for accessing the program. Both resources are available at <http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/csp-2016-signup/>, at the bottom under "More Resources Available!"

Farmers and ranchers are in a unique position to give back to the land that gave so much to them and their families. CSP provides a unique opportunity for farmers and ranchers to protect the integrity of their land and receive support for comprehensive conservation efforts.



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## UPDATE: BEGINNING FARMER/RANCHER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

By Jayme Oates

The following is a brief update on the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) project being conducted by Auburn University, Crotovina, Farmscape Solutions, ASAN, the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG), and the Alabama Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (AFVGA).

### Beginning Farmers Program at SSAWG

This year's breakout session for Alabama farmers attending the SSAWG conference on January 29<sup>th</sup> was co-facilitated by Farmscape Solutions, ACES and ASAN. With 23 folks in the room, here's what the respondents indicated:

- Major groups in the room included new or beginning farmers (39%), gardeners (16%), and non-profits (19%). Cumulatively, producers had 313 acres of specialty crops and livestock.

### Beginning farmer? Want to participate?

#### North AL farmers, contact:

Crotovina — Karen Wynne  
256-520-2400, [karen@crotovina.com](mailto:karen@crotovina.com)

#### South AL farmers, contact:

Farmscape Solutions — Jayme Oates  
334-740-8515, [jayme@farmscapesolutions.com](mailto:jayme@farmscapesolutions.com)



Farmers at the AL networking session at the SSAWG Conference in Lexington, KY, in January. Photo credit Alice Evans

- 12% respondents were conventional farmers and 24% were organic, but over 40% respondents intended to use sustainable agriculture methods for organic or Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) certification.
- Major challenges included access to land (32%); accessing capital (48%); sourcing inputs and supplies (19%); meeting buyer requirements for insurance, food safety, certification, packaging etc. (42%); access to direct (retail) or wholesale markets for their produce (22-25%); and 25 to 35% respondents were challenged by a selling price that covered the cost of production.

### Small Farm Stakeholder Meeting in Montgomery

On February 9<sup>th</sup>, an initial meeting convened to bring together representatives from agencies, institutions, community organi-

zations and businesses that work directly with small farms in Alabama. The purpose of this meeting was to promote communication and collaboration among our small farm stakeholders. The morning was spent identifying farmer traits perceived by the group, as well as farmer needs and services available from each stakeholder group present. In the afternoon, small group break-out sessions focused on five priority areas for 2016. Each group developed a course of action for their identified priority. Priorities and actions include:

- Marketing: development of an on-line tool to assist producers in marketing their products
- Business Planning: promotion of AGPLAN.umn.edu, an online tool for developing a farm business plan
- Farm Services Case Management: A filing system and standards of procedures to use the data management system will be developed for user training.
- Communication: Recruitment of potential new and beginning farmers; will promote beginning farmer program across all stakeholder groups, and establish a platform for education and training opportunities.
- Economic Development: Groundwork for training/networking interns, aspiring and beginning farmers will be laid; and ways to develop narrative of farming as an economic development priority will be explored.

Lunch was provided by River Oaks Farm, Marble Creek Farmstead, Bee Natural Farm, and prepared by Turn Baby Turn in Notasulga, AL.




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## NEWS FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS

After five years living in Ireland, Germany, and North Carolina, Guntersville native **Lydia Atkins** has moved back to Alabama to join the staff at the **McDowell Farm School** in Nauvoo as an Instructor/farmer. Lydia will be living on the farm.

**Beth Walton** has left her position with Murder Point Oyster Co. and is now working part-time at the **Alabama Coastal Foundation** as an administrator and helping with outreach/promotion. She continues to promote Alabama oyster farming in everything she does, as one half of the #oysterpowercouple.

Congratulations to the **Society of St. Andrew**, who last year surpassed one million pounds mark for securing surplus fruits and vegetables in Alabama in a single year. The final count was **1,087,360 pounds!** To learn more about SoSA's work, to sign up as a volunteer, or to learn about opportunities for donating your farm's "seconds" to feed the hungry in Alabama, go to <http://endhunger.org/alabama/>.

After three years in North Carolina, **Lindsey Mullen** has moved back to Alabama to live at Wild Hydrangea Intentional Community in Royal, AL. Lindsey will be working as the Executive Director of Special Session, a summer camp for people with special needs. Special Session is a ministry of the Episcopal Church and takes place at Camp McDowell.

On February 12th **EAT South** said 'see ya later' and happy trails to their warm hearted Farm Manager and Education Director **Catherine Doe**. After 3 years of invaluable dedication and service to EAT South, Catherine is moving on to greener pastures and supporting the transition of **Beth Anne Dunagan**, the current Good Food Day Coordinator, into the Education Director position. EAT South is also honored to introduce

These 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? Send it to [alice@asanonline.org](mailto:alice@asanonline.org) or (256) 743-0742.

our newest VISTA member to the team, **Margaret Clark**, who will be fulfilling the role of K-5 Sprouts Coordinator. Margaret brings a wealth of knowledge in the areas of farm education and food security and is keen to share that with the EAT South community. Director Liz Laroche says, "Although our future holds leadership transition, we are dedicated to sustaining the legacy and vision of EAT South to best meet the needs of our community through sustainable farming and education." Check out [www.eatsouth.org/employment-opportunities/](http://www.eatsouth.org/employment-opportunities/) if you're interested in joining the team!

## CLASSIFIEDS & RESOURCES

**Agroshare.com** is a brand new website started by ASAN member **Frannie Koe**, who wants the site to be "an online community of likeminded folks who believe in their children's futures!" She says, "We are working to provide a place for people to buy, sell, trade or barter items, ask questions and share their experiences in story form on growing, cooking, eating and living in a sustainable way. We are just getting started but as our website grows we see it as a place all can come and interact daily in their journey to be more healthy and sustainable. It is free to all!! Please pass the word along, visit our site and set up a profile with your own story!"

**PeachDish** is an Atlanta-based meal-kit delivery service shipping the freshest

ingredients to customers nationwide. They feature chef-curated recipes with a side of Southern hospitality and source primarily from local farmers and artisans. Visit [www.peachdish.com](http://www.peachdish.com) to learn more. They are wanting to connect with **Alabama farmers/suppliers** – contact [orders@peachdish.com](mailto:orders@peachdish.com) for more information! They are welcoming new **customers** as well – enjoy \$10 OFF your first PeachDish purchase with the code PDBAMA.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

DETAILS FOR THESE EVENTS  
AND MORE, AT  
[WWW.ASANONLINE.ORG/EVENTS](http://WWW.ASANONLINE.ORG/EVENTS)

March 3 – online  
**Exploring Backyard Chicken-keeping Webinar**

March 3 – Eufaula  
**USDA/NRCS Workshop**

March 5 – Jemison  
**Southeastern Natives for Beauty and Wildlife Workshop + All About Native Medicinals Workshop**

March 8 – Fairhope  
**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

March 8 – Cullman  
**Farming 101 Series**

(Continued on page 15)



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Please mail checks made out to ASAN to:  
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## UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 14)

March 8 – Montgomery  
**Veg Out Potluck**

March 10 – Birmingham  
**Cahaba Group of the Sierra Club Meeting**

March 10 – Gadsden  
**Coosa Valley Sierra Club Meeting**

March 12 – Madison  
**Starting Your Backyard Chicken Flock: Session 1**

March 12 – Montgomery  
**EAT South Spring Workshops: Organic Gardening 101**

March 13 – Huntsville  
**Huntsville Cheese Festival**

March 15 – Birmingham  
**99Films: A Place Called Chiapas**

March 15 – Cullman  
**Farming 101 Series**

March 16 – Mobile  
**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

March 17 – online

**NRCS Webinar: Natural Resource and Biodiversity Conservation in Organic Production**

March 19 – Jemison  
**Citrus in the Home Garden**

March 22 – Cullman  
**Farming 101 Series**

March 22 – Cullman  
**Living Landscapes: Growing Apple Trees with Steele Orchard**

March 25-27 – Tuscaloosa  
**Southeastern Student Summit for Justice**

March 26 – Eufaula  
**Peer-to-Peer Training Workshop**

March 30-April 1 - Atlanta  
**National Food Hub Conference**

April 1 – Selma  
**Local Foods and Farmers Market Promotion Program Grant Writing Workshop**

April 2 – Huntsville  
**2016 Family Farm Day**

April 2 – Cullman

**Farm Kids Club: Sheep to Wool**

April 2 – Jemison  
**Perennial Plant Workshop**

April 5 – online  
**NRCS webinar: Transitioning to Organic Production**

April 5 – Cullman  
**Living Landscapes: Growing and Using Gourds**

April 5 – Spanish Fort  
**Mobile Bay Sierra Club Meeting**

April 9 – Jemison  
**Container Gardening Workshop**

April 12 – Fairhope  
**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

April 12 – Montgomery  
**Veg Out Potluck**

April 14 – Birmingham  
**Cahaba Group of the Sierra Club Meeting**

(Continued on page 16)

## ASAN

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## UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 15)

April 14 – Gadsden

**Coosa Valley Sierra Club  
Meeting**

April 16 – Montgomery

**EAT South Spring Work-  
shops: Compost**

April 20 – Mobile

**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

April 30 – Eufaula

**Peer-to-Peer Training  
Workshop**

April 30-May 1 – Montgomery  
**Southern Makers**

May 3 – Cullman

**Living Landscapes: How to  
Set Up Irrigation**

May 3 – Spanish Fort

**Mobile Bay Sierra Club  
Meeting**

May 5-6 – Huntsville

**Small Business Workshop**

May 7 – Jemison

**Herb Workshop**

May 10 – Fairhope

**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

May 10 – Montgomery

**Veg Out Potluck**

May 12 – Birmingham

**Cahaba Group of the Sierra  
Club Meeting**

May 12 – Gadsden

**Coosa Valley Sierra Club  
Meeting**

May 18 – Mobile

**Mobile Bay Green Drinks**

May 20-23 – Mobile

**2016 River Rally + Alabama  
Water Rally**

May 28 – Eufaula

**Peer-to-Peer Training  
Workshop**

June 2-3 – Huntsville

**Meat Goat Workshop**

June 4 – Jemison

**Blueberry and Blackberry  
Walking Tour**

June 4 – West Blocton

**Cahaba River Ramble**