



# Michigan Organic Connections

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## **In This Issue:**

A Message from the Chair .....	1
Online Learning and Farmer Training Opportunities .....	2
My Online-Farming Learning Experience .....	5
Market Your Farm Online with LocalHarvest.....	7
Organic Intensives Announced for 2020 .....	8
MOFFA 2019 Farm Tours Series: Stop 1—Dexter, Michigan.....	9
MOFFA 2019 Farm Tours Series: Stop 2—Compostponics for Raised Beds and Container Gardens .....	10
Local Line is Worth a Look .....	11
Michigan Agricultural Mediation Program Has Expanded Its Offerings .....	11
Help MSU Identify Animal Issues! .....	12
From the Editor .....	12
MOFFA News .....	12

## **A Message from the Chair**

Welcome readers to our autumn newsletter and the dark side of the equinox. The selection at the farmers markets has changed, the hours of daylight have shortened, and many are preparing for winter in the midwest, or at least thinking about it. With that preparation we hope you all have had a chance to preserve some of the wonderful organic harvest available in Michigan, either outside your own door if you have a garden or farm, or at a local market. Many of my mornings for the last month have started with checking jar lids to see if they have well and truly sealed overnight. Not only canning but freezing, dehydrating, or finding a cool dark kitchen cupboard for potatoes are other ways you can preserve the harvest for yourself and extend the season of fresh nutritious food for just a bit longer.

As we face the beginnings of October the end of this year's growing season is in sight. A very wet and cool spring in this area of the country made the season feel short. As we look forward to the rest and healing that winter will bring after the experiences of another demanding year, who isn't already thinking about the next growing season? Is your kitchen window sill full of tomato seeds that you are saving for next summer? Not only is winter a time to



recharge and maybe relax if only by a change of routine, it is also a time to learn and plan. If the winter weather brings as many surprises and days spent trapped in the house as this spring did it will be the perfect time to look at the online learning opportunities we have gathered for you in this newsletter. There are a multitude of choices and many are worth the time and price that is asked of you. As Dr. Biernbaum reminds us in his article, you need to consider how you as an individual best learn and use that as a guide to what learning experiences you choose to participate in. The resources online include much reading material, videos, blogs, and ways you can interact with those who have knowledge to share. If your learning style includes listening to presentations from those with more experience and meeting and talking with people, then you are in luck because winter is also known as “conference season.” Here at MOFFA we are gearing up for our [Organic Intensives](#) in January of 2020. We are particularly excited to be bring you three well known speakers this season: Michael Philips (biological orcharding), Andrew Mefferd (no-till farming), and jim mcdonald (organic herbs). These Intensives are sure to be full of invaluable information, and with lunch and breaks included in the price of the day the only choice you have to make is which one to attend.

Often we at MOFFA are faced with the question of who can join our organization. Many times farmers believe they need to be certified organic, gardeners don't feel they are large enough to be included, and consumers think you need to be a grower to join. Our broad membership already includes sustainable farmers of all methods, defined or otherwise; growers of all sizes and locations (your soil is important no matter how much you can call your own); and consumers whose concern for the food

they eat and the environment they live in has an enormous impact on the growing/farming community. To state this idea another way I would like to share a quote with you from Wendell Berry:

“eating is an agricultural act, by selecting the foods you eat you are ‘farming’ because you are selecting the kind of farming that will thrive in this world.”

With such responsibility in your hands isn't it best to have as much information as possible? This is where MOFFA can help us all. Our website has a collection of so many useful links that you could spend months going through them all, if not the entire winter if you take your time. Whether you are looking for a local farmers' market or a USDA grant to start a farm of your own, our website will give you a place to start. The farm guide, available online and in print, is a way to find farmers growing organic food in Michigan. Jobs, land, and people to talk with, all can be found here. We thrive on our membership as you allow us to carry on as a source of information, learning, and community.

—Jessie Smith

*Jessie Smith was raised on her family's organic farm in Barry County, Michigan. She attended Michigan State University and completed a Bachelors of Science in Crop and Soil Sciences and a Masters in Entomology, where she studied nematode community structure under Dr. George Bird. After working on the family farm for 20 years, she has moved to Indiana where she continues to raise chickens and garden organically. Her close ties to Michigan keep her an active member of MOFFA. She was elected Chair of MOFFA's Board of Directors in April, 2019.*

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## Online Learning and Farmer Training Opportunities

By John Biernbaum

Organic farming and gardening is all about the gradual learning and experience of producing and sharing high quality, healthy food. Learning happens in many ways. While seeing and doing can provide the fastest path to success for many learners, others can be successful supplementing their learning journey by hearing and reading or seeing recorded presentations or experiences.

There is a great list with links to many valuable resources at MOFFA.net, developed and maintained by Julia Christianson, that this article does not try to

repeat. I have not attempted to list general farming support or education related websites like ATTRA or Beginning Farmer. My intent here is to identify other options for online learning. My hope is that I might hear back from some of you about other opportunities that are not mentioned here. My perception is that there are people more qualified than me that could be writing this article.

## Detailed Courses Offered by Farmers

Over the last several years, some high-profile farmers have written books and/or developed online course materials to share their expertise and to generate additional farm income. Some farmers and courses that we are aware of include:

- J.M. Fortier, Market Gardener's Masterclass <http://www.themarketgardener.com/>
- Curtis Stone, Urban Farmer <https://theurbanfarmer.co/>
- Ben Hartman, The Lean Farm School <http://claybottomfarm.com/>
- Conner Crickmore, Neversink Farm <https://www.neversinkfarm.com/>
- Ray Tyler, The Lettuce Masterclass <https://www.lettucemasterclass.com/>
- Michael Kilpatrick, Small Farm University <https://smallfarmuniversity.com>
- Michael Kilpatrick, In the Field Consultants <https://www.inthefieldconsultants.com/>

Many of these farmers and their courses emphasize organic growing, permanent bed systems, efficient use of tools, greenhouses and high tunnels for transplant production and season extension, and diverse marketing methods. The farmers and courses listed here are from Canada or the Northern US with climates similar to Michigan.

These courses appear to be well organized and professionally presented. But I have not taken the courses. Fortunately, Brendan Sinclair, who I have had the pleasure of working with as a student, employee, and colleague, has or is taking courses from each of these farmers and has offered to share his perceptions in a [separate article](#).

From my perspective as an educator with awareness of what university classroom courses cost and the type of information and experience presented, my perception is that the farmer-offered courses are reasonably priced.

For several years on the first day of class I have asked students in MSU's Organic Farming Principles and Practices classes if they know how much they are paying to be in the course? Usually there is little response. I share that at about \$500 per credit, and \$1500 for a 3-credit course, that works out to about \$50 each for 30, 80-minute classes. I also remind students that they should consider that they could be also be earning \$10 per hour for the 3 hours of time spent in and getting to class, and the 6 to 8 hours a week expected time invested outside of class. That's about 10 hours or another \$100 per week and \$50 per class. So the 80-minute class is costing

someone about \$100 each or \$3000 for the 15-week semester. From my perspective, that makes \$1000 or \$2000 for a good online class with downloadable printed resources a reasonable deal in comparison.

A farmer can also look at the cost from the perspective of what they can save in costly errors in poor investments or in time lost trying to find answers for important process questions. Time is often the most limiting factor when it comes to starting a farm, and there is monetary value in investments that save time.

One of the questions that comes to my mind is where are the courses by female farmers? I don't have an answer for this question, other than to point out the courses on flower production that are offered by female farmers.

- Erin Benzakein, Floret Online Workshop <https://www.floretflowers.com/workshops/>
- Lisa Ziegler and Dave Dowling, The Gardener's Workshop/Flower Farming School <https://www.thegardenersworkshop.com/flower-farming-school-online/>

## University Online Farming Courses

The Cornell Small Farms Program has provided learning opportunities for farmers for over a decade. I have not taken any of the courses and do not know any farmers who have. My perception is that the courses are reasonably priced (around \$200) and provide Extension based information that can help starting farmers. These are not organic focused courses.

- Cornell (20 courses)
  - <https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/online-courses/>
  - <https://onlinelearning.cornell.edu/farmer-online-courses>

## E-Organic

From the website: "eOrganic is the organic agriculture community of practice with eXtension. Our mission is to foster a research and outreach community, engage farmers and ag professionals through trainings and publications, and support research and outreach projects." Of interest to farmers are project reports, webinars, YouTube videos, and some more in-depth short courses. <https://eorganic.info/>

## Podcasts for Online Learning

Recorded interviews with farmers and farming professionals are typically a no-cost opportunity with

ready access that can be reviewed while relaxing, traveling, or in some cases working. This is just a small sample to get you started.

- Farmer to Farmer with Chris Blanchard <http://www.farmertofarmerpodcast.com/> (176 episodes, many with transcripts)
- Acres Tractor Time <https://www.acresusa.com/pages/tractor-time-podcast> (33 episodes)
- Advancing Eco Ag with John Kempf <http://regenerativeagriculturepodcast.com/> (37 episodes)
- National Young Farmers Coalition <https://www.youngfarmers.org/category/podcast/> (46 episodes)
- ATTRA/NCAT <https://attra.ncat.org/category/podcasts/> (more than 100 episodes)
- Urban Farming <https://www.urbanfarm.org/2015/11/05/000-welcome-to-the-urban-farm-podcast/> (approaching 500 episodes)

### Webinars

Webinars are recorded presentations that typically include PowerPoint visuals along with the sound recording. The added visual dimension is particularly helpful for visual learners. It is also easier for more presenters to capture information in this format to share. Following are two examples of sites that provide farming related webinars. A search for “farming educational webinars” or “gardening education webinars” would be a good place to start.

- Beginning Farmer Website, has compiled many webinars in one place <https://www.beginningfarmers.org/webinar/>
- MOSES Webinars <https://mosesorganic.org/events/webinars/> (8 available)
- NRCS recorded webinars <http://www.conservationwebinars.net/previous-webinars> (a search for organic farming topics yielded 21 webinars)
- eOrganic Webinars <https://eorganic.org/node/25148> (10 webinars)
- NOFA Mass Webinars <https://www.nofamass.org/inspiring-ideas> (connection to youtube, 29 webinars)

### YouTube Searching and Channels

While there is a lot of useful free information and experience sharing available on YouTube, it is fairly well recognized that there is not any sorting or

grading as to what videos are more useful and accurate and which are less useful and coming from a less experienced perspective. Some videos are focused and to the point, while others are full of less pertinent personal information. Starting with a reliable source or recommended channel or video is one way to possibly connect to other relevant and related videos. From my experience, it takes time that many farmers do not have. If you do have unscheduled or unstructured time, looking at YouTube videos can be more productive than watching athletic events, shows, or movies on TV. I looked for some examples to offer as recommendations of where to start, and quite frankly got frustrated. My recommendation at this point is to make directed searches for either a person or a topic that you want to learn about. You also may want to set a time limit before you start.

### Facebook and Instagram

Many pros and cons regarding Facebook can be considered. My experience is limited, and perhaps because of those limits, the experience has been positive. The first choice likely is whether to be involved or not. I got involved initially to see information about our sons and then our grandson. The farming and gardening part was essentially an add-on. If one chooses to participate, it is possible to follow people or organizations that have something to offer to you. And then there are the “sponsored” ads.

My examples on Facebook that I follow are [Raised Bed Gardening](#) and [Raised Bed Gardening International](#), and Joe Lamp's [Grow a Greener World](#). I get ideas and learn what other people are dealing with relative to gardening.

My examples on Instagram are mostly for following former students and their farms, or farmers that I value their perspective. For me, Instagram is more focused, or has fewer things that I see, so it is easier to have boundaries. I follow “OrganicFarming” for general information. I enjoy the posts from [bearcreekorganicfarm](#), [bionutrientfoodassociation](#), [titusfarmsmi](#), [tenhens](#), [spiritofwalloon](#), [seedstarting](#), [robustcompost](#), [zumo\\_eco\\_farm](#), and [msunorthfarm](#).

I am not big on posting material on Facebook or Instagram, but it is obvious how a farmer can provide a valuable connection to their community with a reasonable amount of effort. [MOFFA](#) has a presence on Facebook, and we routinely get several new likes each week. We are aware that we could do more if someone had the time to take on a “social media” role with MOFFA or the Board of Directors.

## Closing Thoughts

In past MOFFA "Michigan Organic Connections" newsletter issues, we have emphasized the importance of attending farmer conferences for continuing education, and we make an effort to publicize the Michigan, regional, and national meetings. These in-person meetings provide valuable information and personal connections. The cost of these events goes beyond registration, and includes travel and lodging. Online learning removes those costs and can bring a good return on investment.

Another point to consider is that people have diverse learning styles. One common assessment protocol refers to Visual, Auditory, Reading/writing, and Kinesthetic (activity) learners; the acronym VARK is used to cover all four types (<http://vark-learn.com/>). I have the students in my online courses do the questionnaire to help them consider their learning styles. I also work to include different types of

teaching activities that address each of the learning styles.

Online learning, combined with on-farm learning, can provide a good mix of seeing, hearing, and reading options (mind-on), as well as hands-on active learning options. You need to take responsibility for identifying what mix works best for you.

Finally, while this summary focuses on plant growing, the amazing farm tour at Crane Dance Farm in late September reminded me that livestock husbandry information can be found online also. Perhaps Livestock Husbandry is a future theme for MOC Newsletter? Any thoughts?

*Dr. John Biernbaum is Professor of Horticulture at MSU, was instrumental in the founding and growth of the Student Organic Farm at MSU, has been a member of MOFFA for over 15 years, and served as MOFFA's Chair 2015-2018.*

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## My Online-Farming Learning Experience

By Brendan Sinclair

2017 felt like the year of the online farm course, with several eminent small-scale farmers releasing their own version of online video instruction for a fee. I remember seeing a lot of grumbling from farmers on social media about the high cost of these courses, and I strongly disagree with their complaints. Having just completed an online graduate degree in Sustainable Food Systems, I had become accustomed to shelling out \$2,100 for a 3 credit, 6-week course, which I had to pay for with student loans. By comparison, the online farm courses that I was signing up for ranged from around \$400 to \$2,100 and featured life-long memberships. The skills that I acquired through participating in these farm courses will serve me for the rest of my farming career, while it remains to be seen whether a graduate degree was a sound investment.

At the time that I signed up for many of these classes, I was living on an island 12 miles off the coast of Maine, and managed the only local certified organic farm in my community. It was not logistically practical to visit other nearby farms in the region, and attending conferences or workshops was difficult due to geographical isolation. Having access to online courses was the best way for me to connect with the small farming community and improve my skills as a farm manager without having to take time off of work. I could watch the videos in

the evenings or on my lunch breaks, and trial new techniques over time. It was also great to focus on these courses during the winter months and make plans to implement different production strategies for the following growing season.

I still regularly access these courses for specific examples of production techniques that directly influence improvements I make on farms that I am managing. As a result of these courses and my farm management experience, I have a solid foundation for what tools and equipment I will need to invest in for starting my own farm someday. Many of the courses are regularly updated with new content, and often have associated groups on Facebook where class participants can ask questions and troubleshoot with each other to solve specific problems they are encountering on their own farms. It is really helpful to see so many examples of how different farmers are managing production in different regions throughout the world, and I am thankful to be part of these supportive networks.

Over the last three years, I have invested in the following online farm courses.

- Neversink Market Farm course with Connor Crickmore
- Market Gardener's Masterclass with J.M Fortier

- Lean Farm School with Ben Hartman
- Lettuce Masterclass with Ray Tyler
- Small Farm University with Michael Kilpatrick

Most of these courses focus on the smaller one to two-acre scale, with an emphasis on season extension. I have found benefit in all of the courses that I have taken, and all of them are slightly different. The following is my assessment of each course and how it specifically helped me improve production systems on the farms that I have managed.

#### [Neversink Farm Course](#) with **Connor Crickmore**

The quality of video instruction in this course is excellent. I really appreciate Connor Crickmore's teaching style. He discusses how he used to perform specific tasks, explains why that was less effective, and explains the evolution of decisions that have led him to his current techniques. One of the most important themes of this course is the emphasis on systems, not just production. My ability to manage employees and effectively communicate expectations and delegate tasks for consistent results significantly improved as a result of participating in the Neversink Farm Course.

#### [Market Gardener's Master Class](#) with **J.M. Fortier**

This course is the most expensive out there. The videography is well done, and my only criticism is that perhaps too much emphasis was placed on entertainment value, with flashy editing and a techno music soundtrack. The content of this course is organized by crop, and includes a comprehensive life cycle of around 20 of the top-selling crops, demonstrating every aspect of production: seeding, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and packing. There are also great notes and written guides to supplement the video instruction.

#### [The Lean Farm School](#) with **Ben Hartman**

This course has a lower production value than some of the other courses available, but Ben Hartman has done an awesome job making affordable content available for farmers. I really appreciate that he has broken up his course into different sections and provided the option for people to sign up for specific classes, such as compost production or tomato production. Ben is a great teacher and is constantly innovating on his farm, and this is reflected in his courses. Some of the techniques that he now implements on his farm are different than what he advocated in his books, which is another argument in favor of investing in a lifetime membership for the

online course in order to receive updates as farm systems evolve.

#### [The Lettuce Master Class](#) with **Ray Tyler**

This course emphasizes year round lettuce production in the south with a focus on hot and humid environments, but there is plenty of helpful content for northern growers as well. Ray Tyler is a good teacher and it is easy to replicate his systems with the videos. I know a lot of growers who have experienced improved germination as a result of this course, and I applied what I learned about overhead irrigation systems from this course for the 2019 season with great results. This is also one of the most affordable online farming courses I have taken.

#### [Small Farm University](#) with **Michael Kilpatrick**

This course is set up as a monthly subscription service and is constantly being updated with new content. I have learned so much from Michael Kilpatrick over the last several years, and Small Farm University is a centralized source for all of the information he has put together. I applied many of the concepts about wash pack design from this course with great success. Michael also interviews a lot of other farmers, which provides an opportunity to see how other farms are managing production. He is also very responsive on social media and offers one-on-one coaching for students in the course as they improve their farm business.

#### **Additional Perspective**

Part of the reason these courses felt so beneficial to me is because I already had several years of organic farming experience to begin with. I do not think that these courses are a substitute for actual hands-on experience, and I am concerned that some beginning farmers are starting farms after only participating in one or two online farming courses. I also think it is important to understand that there are no silver bullets in agriculture, and that these farming models should be viewed as successful examples of small-scale production that can be modified to fit an individual farm's context.

Rather than emulating any one particular farm model, I have applied the most practical techniques from each course to fit within the existing context of whatever farm I am managing, knowing that markets, geography, and soil type are going to be different for every farm. For example, the "no-till" permanent bed system popularized by Connor Crickmore in the Neversink Farm course worked well in the silty loam soil I was working with in Maine, but the farm that I recently managed in Michigan

required raised beds due to heavy clay soils and excessive rain in the spring. Had I not applied the walk behind tractor techniques for raising beds that I learned from J.M. Fortier's online masterclass, I would have lost a significant amount of my spring vegetable production due to drainage issues.

**In my experience, time is always the most limited resource on a diversified farm, and being able to implement efficient systems and production techniques that save time has significantly improved my quality of life.**

I think that the return on investment for these courses is the time saved from trial and error. In my

experience, time is always the most limited resource on a diversified farm, and being able to implement efficient systems and production techniques that save time has significantly improved my quality of life. When compared to the cost of education for traditional academic institutions, these online farming courses feel like a reasonable alternative for beginning farmers who are interested in focusing on small-scale organic vegetable production. I highly recommend this investment to any farmer who is interested in learning how to farm better.

*Brian Sinclair has been farming since his involvement with the Student Organic Farm at MSU during its very early days nearly 20 years ago, in locations from coastal Maine to the Colorado Rockies. He currently manages Lotus Flower Farm in far southwest Michigan.*

## Market Your Farm Online with LocalHarvest

by Anneliese Abbott

Whether we like it or not, the way most people find information nowadays is by doing a Google search—either on their computer or their smartphone. Chances are that the majority of people interested in buying local, organic food will look for farms on the internet, and they'll be most inclined to click on the links that come up first.

I highly recommend that every farm that markets directly to consumers put up a website; it's inexpensive and looks a lot better than a Facebook page. But chances are that no matter how nice your website, it won't come up first when people search for something generic like "csa kalamazoo." Google results are listed based on how many people visit a website and how many other websites link to it, not necessarily by relevance. Especially if your website is new and hasn't had many visitors yet, it might end up on the tenth or twentieth page where no one will ever see it—or it might not come up at all.



Fortunately for small farms, there's a way to get your farm right at the top of the Google search—by listing it on [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org). Usually, LocalHarvest is the first link that comes up, and it is one of the most useful tools for finding a CSA or other local produce in an unfamiliar region.

LocalHarvest was created by Guillermo Payet and Erin Barnett in 2003 to “make it easy to find good food,” and the website is now visited by millions of people each year. As its designers explain, “LocalHarvest connects people looking for good food with the farmers who produce it.”

For someone trying to find a CSA or other farm product in a particular area, LocalHarvest is an extremely useful resource because it makes it easy to compare different farms side-by-side. A lot of people make their decision about which CSA to join solely from the LocalHarvest listing, so it is well worth the time it takes to put a little effort into creating a good, descriptive page for your farm. Best of all, a basic listing on the website is free, although if you want to get rid of the annoying ads they charge you \$30 a year.

We first listed our CSA on LocalHarvest last year, and almost every new shareholder who has joined since then first found our farm from the LocalHarvest listing. Our website doesn't come up on a Google search of CSAs in Kalamazoo, but our farm is about the tenth one from the top on a LocalHarvest search for Kalamazoo CSAs.

Anneliese Abbott earned her B.S. in plant and soil science from The Ohio State University and has been researching sustainable agriculture and agricultural history since 2015.

She also runs an organic CSA for Abbott Farms in Otsego, MI and can be contacted at [abbott.222@osu.edu](mailto:abbott.222@osu.edu).

## Organic Intensives Announced for 2020

MOFFA held its first Organic Intensives in March, 2015, and those who have attended year after year have consistently found the sessions to be of greater than expected value. On January 11th, MOFFA will offer the sixth annual Organic Intensives educational event, providing current and future farmers, as well as serious gardeners, an opportunity to focus intensely on subjects for which there is substantial interest and a desire to reach a level of deep understanding.

For 2020, MOFFA is working with individuals who are nationally recognized experts and educators in one of three topic areas:

- Successful Biological Orchardling with Michael Phillips
- Organic No-Till Farming with Andrew Mefferd
- Local Organic Herbs for Health with jim mcdonald



### Successful Biological Orchardling

Fascinating biological connections make for a healthy orchard ecosystem. All insect pests and fruit tree disease—whether fungal or bacterial—have

launching points and particular timing. Healthy trees address these challenges first and foremost from within. Growers utilizing an ongoing investment in soil nutrition and biodiversity set the stage for gentler organic sprays to grow a successful fruit crop. The challenges you face at your locale will become far more manageable as you build a holistic system that keeps trees and berry plantings healthy from the get-go. We'll wrap up this day with important marketing perspective for selling the good fruit. Our guide for this session will be Michael Phillips of Lost Nation Orchard, author of [The Holistic Orchard](#), [The Apple Grower](#), and most recently [Mycorrhizal Planet: How Fungi and Plants Work Together to Create Dynamic Soils](#).



### Organic No-Till Farming

In recent years we have learned that tilling kills beneficial soil life, burns up organic matter, and releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. If the ground could instead be prepared for planting

without tilling, time and energy could be saved, soil organic matter increased, carbon sequestered, and dependence on machinery reduced. Andrew Mefferd, author of [The Organic No-Till Farming Revolution](#) will discuss his experiences in talking with farmers during the development of the book, and will address practical as well as philosophical approaches that can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase efficiency and profitability, and promote soil health. He will also discuss his experiences working on a no-till research farm, and how he applied the ideas on his own farm.



### Local Organic Herbs for Health

An investment in your diet is an investment in your health and quality of life. Are herbs a part of your diet and/or your farm or garden food and medicine growing? They

certainly can and should be. jim mcdonald, one of the country's premier herbal practitioners and educators, will offer a detailed look at several ways herbs that you can grow, harvest, or purchase locally can be used in your daily diet for health. jim has been teaching practical herbalism for decades. His website ([herbcraft.org](http://herbcraft.org)) has long been a source of information and a starting point of exploration for budding and blooming herbalists. Two focus topics will be bitter herbs as an important dietary health component and gut healing teas. jim will be joined by Ben Hicks and Alex Rea of Black Locust Gardens in Dexter, MI ([blacklocustgardens.com](http://blacklocustgardens.com)). Ben and Alex will share their experience developing a certified organic herb production farm and an herbalist's community-based integrative approach to health.



The event will take place on Saturday, January 11th, at the Plant and Soil Sciences building on the MSU campus in East Lansing. More information will be found at [moffa.net/oi-2020.html](http://moffa.net/oi-2020.html) as it becomes available.

Thanks to our [sponsors](#), we have been able to keep the cost low at \$85 for MOFFA members and \$115 for non-members. The registration fee covers six

hours of learning, comprehensive printed materials, lunch, breaks, a reception at the end of the day, and a great chance to network with fellow farmers and gardeners from across Michigan. We anticipate that a limited number of scholarships will be available for those for whom cost is a barrier; for information please email <mailto:moffaorganic@gmail.com> or call 248-262-6826.

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## MOFFA 2019 Farm Tours Series: Stop 1—Dexter, Michigan

by John Biernbaum

The 2019 MOFFA Farm Tour Series' first stop on August 18 in Dexter Michigan was at Nature and Nurture LLC and Seeds. The rain stopped just as participants gathered at 2:00. What followed was three full and very quickly passing hours of detailed sharing by Mike Levine and Erica Kempter.

As the participants arrived and gathered, we started looking at the equipment barn including the farm tractor and a reciprocal spader that has benefits over a rototiller. Then the group split to spend time learning about the seed side of the farm with Erica and the nursery and landscape side with Mike.

Erica was enthusiastically ready to teach us as much as she could in the time available about the



importance of local seed production and how all farmers and gardeners can benefit from supporting local seed systems and seed saving. She did this in part by sharing how she met John Navazio on an airplane and had a conversation that changed her life. We learned about seed selection and seed quality, including seed size and purity. We were able to see variety evaluations and seed production for several crops including tomatoes, zinnias, basil, amaranth, and many others.

The two groups of participants intersected again to hear Mike share about the shiitake mushroom production on logs. This is something that they have worked on for several years, and that Mike shared at the MOFFA 2019 Organic Intensive on Mushroom Production back in January. It was nice to see the set-up for shading and to hear the details of the preparation, production, and harvesting.

Next, we visited the plant nursery and holding area, where a variety of fruit and landscape plants are available for sale or for the landscaping part of the business to install for homeowners. Mike has decades of experience with what varieties work best in southwest Michigan. He helped us to understand why the varieties available at garden centers and home improvement stores are often not as good an investment. Mike works on collecting material from around the country and making it locally available as potted nursery stock.

Next stop was the first year experimental hemp field for seed production of CBD hemp. Mike was able to get one of the early licenses made available by the state to farmers looking to investigate hemp as an alternative crop. He shared some interesting stories



about their first year journey, which I am not sharing so next time you attend the farm tour yourself.

The last stop was the Nature Education and Camping area of the farm. Mike and Erica connect with their community and share their 80-acre property in a variety of ways. We heard about the youth nature education program that includes winter experiences in a structure built by participants. We also heard about the **hipcamp** campsite program that they participate in and that you can learn more about here: <https://www.hipcamp.com/>. The program

helps farmers and private property owners connect with campers and schedule overnight visitors.

You can learn more about their seed offerings at: [natureandnurtureseeds.com](http://natureandnurtureseeds.com) and landscape services at [www.natureandnurture.org](http://www.natureandnurture.org). You can also come hear Mike and Erica share their story at the Great Lakes Fruit and Vegetable Organic Session on Thursday, December 11 in Grand Rapids. We thank Erica and Mike for their generosity and hospitality and encourage you to think about being a participant or host for future MOFFA farm tours.

## MOFFA 2019 Farm Tours Series: Stop 2—Compostponics for Raised Beds and Container Gardens

### Our Takeaways

#### First Review by Cindy Goebel

Saturday August 24th was the date of the informative MOFFA MSU farm tour titled "Compostponics and Vermicompost: New Perspectives." It was conducted by the knowledgeable and charming John Biernbaum, PhD, MSU Professor, Department of Horticulture. John provided 18 attendees with 3 hours of inspiration about: different methods of creating compost, how to make or purchase raised beds for container growing, and ways to make and use worm compost. His vast experience and passion give hope for those who desire to raise successful organic crops even in areas with limited access to healthy soil.

Participants walked around the research center with John while he showed us many different ways to amend or create healthy soil organic matter using what is readily available. These ideas provided practical applications on different scales anywhere from large organic farms to small urban gardens. John's lectures, publications, etc., can be found on his website: [http://www.hrt.msu.edu/people/dr\\_john\\_bierbaum](http://www.hrt.msu.edu/people/dr_john_bierbaum). It includes an expanded version of John's worm composting lecture with pictures.

Interesting "take aways" include: Hugelkulture method for raised beds, videos showing how to build [low tunnel](#) or [high tunnel](#) hoop houses for entrepreneurial gardening ([miwisewoman.org](http://miwisewoman.org)), and the lasagna method of composting, among many others. In summary, we all walked away with renewed and expanded knowledge for improving the organic microbiology of our crops, gardens, beds, or pots. It rings true that the healthier the microbes in our plant roots and shoots, the healthier the

microbiome of our physical bodies when we consume them.

**"Land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy..." —Aldo Leopold**

Thank you to John and to all who helped plan MOFFA Farm Tours 2019!

*In childhood, Cindy's grandparents' annual garden provided home-canned products for winter consumption. An alumna of EMU, (BS, Dietetics), Cindy spent 19 years as a Nutritionist for Women's Health Services (Ingham Community Health Services). In retirement, she enjoys her husband's organic garden, using his composts in her containers and pots.*

#### Second Review By Brian Schandavel

Barb and I have been growing our own vegetables and herbs on our 1/3-acre city lot in Royal Oak, Michigan for over 10 years. As we've been increasing the size of the garden, we've been including more raised beds. What attracted us to the farm class was that it was to cover methods for making our own compost specifically for growing in containers and raised beds with the materials readily available to the urban grower. We have ready access to wood chips, leaves, coffee grounds, and food scraps and we're not far from sources of hay and straw.

We are both aware of the value of making compost and have made our own compost, but without much knowledge beyond the very basics of mixing "green"

and “brown” together. This class was especially valuable in clearly delving into some of the science behind compost. And further, how the microbiology of a plant is at its roots and how organic soil makes a healthier plant. The class taught us how to make the organic soil for our plants and how the compost we make becomes the fertilizer for the plants, moving us beyond having to purchase fertilizers from off-site.

Since retiring from my job in the automotive industry at the beginning of the year, I was wanting to get more involved in helping with Barb’s garden. She’s been pretty much doing it all while I was working



outside the home. I really wanted to pay more attention to our compost piles and try to make them go faster. The class has taught me how to properly mix the materials for compost, the correct proportions of green to brown, what the

temperature needs to be for killing weed seeds and/or seeds from food scraps, tools to use, how to

judge proper moisture content using a squeeze test, knowing when it’s finished and ready to use, and finally how to use it when filling containers and raised beds.

Our compost piles do go slowly and become home to many earthworms, the big juicy nightcrawlers. Seeing the worm compost being made was a bonus for us.

We both want to continue to learn to grow a better garden each year. We’re proud of the of the urban garden we’ve made. Stretching it to the front yard has attracted many comments and conversations with neighbors wanting to know more about it. We want to promote making more of these kinds of gardens in the city because we believe that a healthier city contributes to a healthier planet, and we appreciate the work done by MOFFA to reach into the urban centers.

*Brian Schandavel is a retired automotive engineer from Detroit, who with his wife Barb, enjoy the many benefits of maintaining an organic fruit and vegetable garden at their home in Royal Oak, Michigan.*

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## Local Line is Worth a Look

There are a lot of websites online vying for your attention and offering to help you be better at what you do. Local Line, an e-commerce platform for farmers and other food suppliers, looks like it has plenty to offer if you are interested in expanding your online presence. In addition to creating a website for your farm quickly and for free, it offers tools such as a minimum order calculator, product profitability calculator, and delivery cost calculator to help you to determine where you should be spending your time (also at no cost). If you are further interested in

online selling and ready to pay for assistance, Local Line also offers various programs to help you track inventory, schedule deliveries, organize orders, collect payments, and much more. For more information, see what they have to say on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Linked In](#), [Instagram](#), or visit their [main page](#).




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## Michigan Agricultural Mediation Program Has Expanded Its Offerings



Michigan farmers can now mediate a wide range of disputes at no cost through the Michigan Agricultural Mediation Program (MAMP) thanks to the 2018 Farm Bill. The bill enables the MAMP to mediate

agricultural issues involving leases, farm transitions, organic certification, next-door neighbors, and more. To request free mediation or for more information, call (800) 616-7863 or go online at <http://www.agmediation.org>. All calls are confidential.

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## Help MSU Identify Animal Issues!

Farmer input is needed to help Michigan State University identify and address agriculture and wildlife priorities in Michigan. Agricultural producers face many challenges on the farm, some originating from animal pests. Research and science-based

management recommendations to help farmers address wildlife on the farm are limited, available for some crops and pest species but not others. With this [brief survey](#) (less than 3 minutes), you can help to drive future research and mitigation efforts

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## From the Editor

This newsletter has been a long time in coming. I know that most readers might not realize this (unless they have been desperately waiting for the next Michigan Organic Connections), but it was intended for slightly earlier in the year. Its delay, to me, seems to represent this entire growing season. Spring was cold and seemed late in arriving. We had to wait for the rain to stop and this made the planting late, and then during the summer we waited for rain that never came, which caused struggling crops to struggle all the more. The harvest has been late, generally. These autumn rains are going to delay end-of-the-season work and make their completion late as well. Late is the theme of the year. The theme of this newsletter, however, is online resources for the farmer with an emphasis on

learning opportunities. How appropriate! This year has reminded us that the weather patterns are changing and we have to adjust. We have to try new techniques. We might have to think outside of the box. It is important that we continue to learn from experience and from each other how to do our important and rarely easy jobs better. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this newsletter. I thought it would never come to fruit!

— Leah Smith

*Leah Smith is the MOFFA Newsletter Editor and a Michigan State alumna (B.S., Crop and Soil Sciences). She works at her family's farm, Nodding Thistle, and is a freelance writer.*

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## MOFFA News

**Board** – We are still actively seeking a member from the southeastern area of the state, ideally someone who is involved in urban agriculture. In fact, no matter who or where you are, if you are a MOFFA member who would be interested in serving on the board, please [let us know](#).

**Michigan Organic Connections Newsletter** – We continue to be interested in featuring new voices in the newsletter. The remaining MOC for this year will explore the question of organics and nutrition, or rather where does one find nutrition in food. If you are interested in contributing, or if you have a suggestion about future content or can recommend someone who would be interested in contributing,, please [contact Leah](#), our newsletter editor. If you're not interested in writing an article, please consider

contributing photos of your farm or your harvest; we're always looking for more illustrations.

**Sponsors** – MOFFA is now accepting Sponsorship from organizations and individuals who are willing to demonstrate their support of our mission with a financial contribution. The change to soliciting sponsorships generally, rather than specifically for Organic Intensives, will enable us to increase our activities throughout the year. Please take a moment to view the logos of those who have already pledged their support at the end of this message, and let them know you appreciate their sponsorship. If you are interested in becoming a sponsor for 2020, please [email us](#) or view the [sponsorship page](#) on the website.

**WHY JOIN MOFFA :** To position yourself and every dollar you donate toward spreading a wholesome, just, ecologically focused organic ethos across all of our local Michigan communities. Join online at <http://www.moffa.net/membership.html> or call 248-262-6826.

## MOFFA Sponsors 2019

