

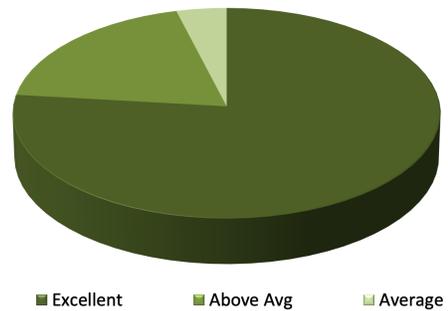


MOFFA Organic Intensives 2022 Final Report and Participant Evaluations

On January 8th MOFFA held its seventh annual Organic Intensives. The presenters were a mix of local experts, farmers, and producers.

We had 92 people registered, which was a little less than our usual average. We assume the treat of covid kept the number of attendees down and indeed some registrants had to cancel due to covid related issues. Ultimately, 88 people were actually able to attend. Those who did make it participated in in-depth educational sessions on one of three topics: Organic Mushroom Cultivation and Management (34), The Farm Ecosystem: Managing for Pollinators, Beneficials, and Pests (21), and In-Row Weed Control Strategies: Fine Tuning Equipment . . . The Details for Success (33).

**MOFFA Organic Intensives 2022
Participant Evaluations of
Content and Presenters**



Participants were asked to evaluate their experience at the end of the day, and 86% responded—78% of those in the Mushroom session, 100% in the Farm Ecosystems session, and 81% of those attending the Weeds session.

Again, this year, we offered a discount on the registration fee for MOFFA members, and 46% of those registering took us up on the offer by becoming MOFFA members or renewing their membership. Just over half (56%) of those registered identified as farmers (69% of whom were certified organic). Of the remaining participants 16% identified as gardeners, 12% represented a food or farm related business or non-profit organization, 7% were educators (including MSUE and Conservation District personnel), and the remaining 9% fell into other categories.

Rating “Excellent” or “Above Average” Across All Sessions	
Content / Information	98%
Presentation / Presenters	94%
Handouts	90%
Venue / Facilities / Location	90%
Registration Process	94%
Lunch	94%
Value (return on investment)	96%

As in years past, participants overwhelmingly felt that their time was well spent. The chart at left shows ratings for various aspects of the program, across all three sessions.

The participant comments that stood out this year were “Wonderful community atmosphere!” and “Breaks were a little long!” Many simply said “Thank you!” A number of participants in the Mushroom session stated that they enjoyed the hands-on portion of the day. In the Farm Ecosystem session,

participants appreciated the wide selection of presenters and the round table discussion while those in the In-Row Weeds session were very excited to see and hear about new weeding equipment. “This was great!” was told to our staff more than once during the day. A few participants indicated that the full day of activities was too much and suggested making some of the material covered

available on-line to be reviewed at their own pace. Farmers also found it difficult to commit the entire day to an off-farm event.

We try each year to find a local caterer to provide lunch, snacks, and hot drinks throughout the day. Our caterer was Teff-rific from Lansing who makes Ethiopian cuisine, a choice that many attendees were impressed with and had not expected at a small farming conference. The choice of cuisine also allowed for plenty of offerings for vegetarians, vegans, and others with dietary restrictions.

Organic Mushroom Cultivation and Management

This was the second time that we presented a mushroom session and just like the first time, it was the first session to “sell out.” Growing mushrooms for personal use and/or sale is currently an extremely popular topic and participants are very excited to come learn and gain some hands on experience in inoculating a variety of growing media. Indeed, one of the future OI topics suggested in the Farm Ecosystem session was to have the Mushroom session again.



Our mushroom session was ably presented by our first-year board member, Shara Trierweiler, who has been growing and marketing organic mushrooms for four years. The morning was spent in the classroom where Shara presented the basic anatomy of mushrooms, what causes them to grow, and how these factors are manipulated to grow cultivated mushrooms. They then dove into specific mushroom cultivation practices, including those for oyster mushrooms in straw, shiitake log cultivation, and winecap production. Organic compliant disease and pest management practices rounded out the presentation portion of the day.

After lunch attendees were finally allowed to ‘get their hands dirty.’ Shara demonstrated the inoculation of straw and logs with oyster and shiitake mushroom spawn, respectively, as well as the preparation of the needed media. Attendees were then invited to stuff plastic bags with oyster mushroom inoculated straw and then drill hardwood logs and put in plugs colonized with shiitake spawn. Each person went home with a bag of straw inoculated with oyster mushroom spawn, a maple log plugged with shiitake spawn, and the satisfaction that in as little as three weeks they could be harvesting their own homegrown mushrooms.



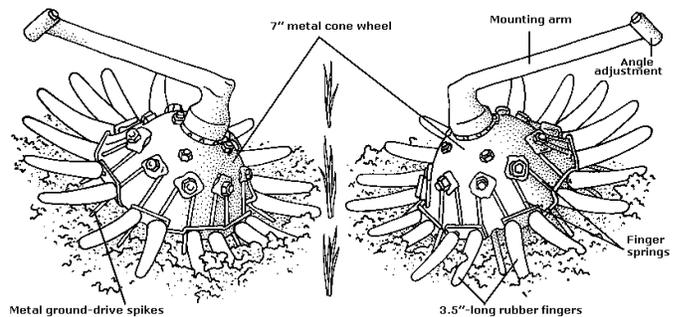
The Farm Ecosystem: Managing for Pollinators, Beneficials, and Pests

Organic farmers are constantly working to find “balance” in the ecosystem of the farm. Managing

pests, attracting pollinators, and not killing the beneficials ... it's a delicate dance. This track was designed to explore different parts of the ecosystem from different perspectives and inspire growers to consider new approaches to their practices. The farm ecosystem track was broken up into four sessions. Joe Scrimger started the day with a discussion of how managing soil health impacts the biodiversity on the farm. Viewing all insects, weeds, and disease as being present for a reason, he shared the idea that they give information about the system that can be used to improve it and that when habitat is created for beneficials the pests are soon pushed out. After a break we explored the role of pollinators and beneficials with University of Michigan Native Bee Specialist Rebecca Tonietto, Debra Jackson of Monarch Watch, and Rufus Isaacs of the Michigan State University Department of Entomology. Each presenter discussed the role of beneficial insects and strategies to manage and maintain their habitat. In the afternoon a panel of three local farmers, Christian Flickenger of Garden Hoard Farm, Leah Smith of Nodding Thistle, and Alex Ball of Old City Acres, discussed their strategies to manage biodiversity on the farm, including pest pressures and methods used to manage them. During the final portion we had a round table discussion with participants and presenters to discuss gleanings from the conversations of the day.

In-Row Weed Control Strategies: Fine Tuning Equipment . . . The Details for Success

Growers want weed control to be standardized and easily repeatable but the reality is just the opposite, especially as the amount of land or variety of crops is increased. This makes weed control one of the biggest challenges for organic field crop producers. There are, however, some foundational tactics and this session started with a review of these tactics presented by another of our board members, Dan Rossman. Next Daniel Brainard presented some of his research with the fantastic advancements in cultivation tools available for large scale, organic vegetable production.



For the second part of the day attendees heard from farmers with experience using these cultivation methods. First were Fred Woodcock and Darin Evon, employees of Chaffin Farms. As the team leader of the farm for organic production for 33 years, Fred and his crew have been very creative in testing multiple weed control strategies. Using purchased off the shelf tools and attachments from manufacturers and having designed and fabricated their own unique tools and attachments, they have personally experienced the use of these tools in multiple crops over several years in a variety of soil conditions. Darin has been a summer part-time employee at Chaffin Farms for 9 years and has been instrumental in the use and adjustment of the weed control tools and strategies. Tim Bissell shared his unique experience using flammers and a cultivator camera activated hitches in the traditional field crops of corn and beans. He now farms 2500 acres of organic corn, black beans, pinto beans, peas, squash, and soybeans. All together they had a vast experience to share that elicited many questions from the audience and led to a profitable exchange of ideas.

A unique value of the Organic Intensives is the course materials compiled for each participant. Presentation power points and supplemental reading materials were provided to maximize the learning in and after class. We appreciate the work our presenters did to help us make this information available. This year we also gave participants in the Mushroom session the book *Mycelium Running* by Paul Stamets; participants in the Farm Ecosystem session got a choice of the Xerces Society's *Farming with Native Beneficials* or *Attracting Native Pollinators*; and those in the Weeds session received a reprint of *Manage Weeds on Your Farm*, a SARE publication.

As part of the evaluation, we asked participants to identify knowledge or techniques they learned that they plan to put into practice, and 95% of the respondents in Mushrooms, 79% in Farm Ecosystems, and 73% in the Weeds session took the time to do that. The information they provided will help us improve our future offerings.

We received many suggestions for future Intensives. The four topics mentioned most often were permaculture and/or silvopasture, cover cropping, start-up information (ranging from funding and finding land to basic beginner growing techniques), and more on mushrooms (cultivated and wild foraged).

In addition to participant fees, the program was made possible by our Sponsors for 2022:

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Ten people were registered with full-coverage scholarships made possible by a SARE mini-grant, but only 6 attended, the rest had to cancel due to illness. Another nine people received registration fee subsidies of \$90 thanks to generous donations from George and Anne Bird, the Maynard Kaufman Estate, and a donation from Decatur Human Services in memory of our board member and past administrative coordinator, Julia Christianson.

The Organic Intensives planning committee is gratified and encouraged to see the continued positive feedback expressed by the participants, and will begin planning soon for Organic Intensives 2023. If you have suggestions for next year's event, or would like to participate in the planning, please let us know. The date currently selected is Saturday, January 14, 2023.

