

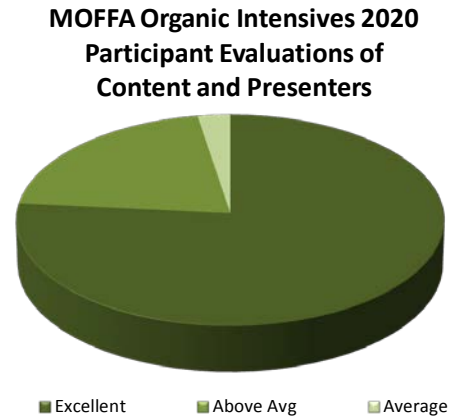


MOFFA Organic Intensives 2020 Final Report and Participant Evaluations

On January 11th MOFFA held its sixth annual Organic Intensives. All three presenters were nationally known experts—Michael Phillips, Andrew Mefferd, and jim mcdonald. More than 110 people registered, but owing to the weather providing challenging driving conditions, only 76 were actually able to attend. Those who did make it participated in in-depth educational sessions on one of three topics: Successful Biological Orchardring (41), Organic No-Till Farming (19), and Local Organic Herbs for Health (16).

Participants were asked to evaluate their experience at the end of the day, and 83% responded—88% of those in the orcharding session, 74% in the no-till session, and 81% of those attending the herbs session.

This year we offered a larger discount on the registration fee for MOFFA members, and 80% of those registering took us up on the offer by becoming MOFFA members or renewing their membership. Just under half of those registered identified as farmers, 18% identified as gardeners, 18% represented a food or farm related business or non-profit organization, 12% were educators (including MSUE and Conservation District personnel), and the remaining 5% fell into other categories.



Rating “Excellent” or “Above Average” Across All Sessions	
Content / Information	97%
Presentation / Presenters	98%
Handouts	86%
Venue / Facilities / Location	95%
Registration Process	91%
Lunch	98%
Value (return on investment)	98%

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.

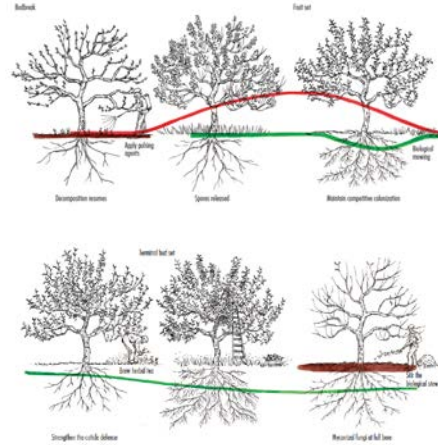
Our favorite comment this year was “This is my favorite winter educational opportunity the year —> thank you!” But there were multiple comments along the lines of “I like the relaxed environment,” “What a wonderful class!” “Love the no-judgment

free-flow of information,” and “Wonderful, very very informative,” and lots of people just said “Thank You!” Some participants helped us to see a lack of gender and cultural diversity in our selection of presenters, and offered suggestions for future presenters that could increase diversity. We took these comments to heart and will be making a greater effort to bring in presenters who are representative of all the different farmers and farms who contribute to Michigan’s vital organic agricultural sector.

We made a particular effort this year to provide an all-organic lunch with plenty of offerings for vegetarians, vegans, and others with dietary restrictions, and apparently the effort was appreciated as the evaluations of the lunch offerings were significantly higher than in prior years.

Successful Biological Orchardling

The weather conditions did not deter attendees from spending a day listening to Michael Phillips of Lost Nation Orchard about his experiences, knowledge and successes in biological orcharding. Over forty orchard enthusiasts took in Michael's very pragmatic approach to farming. The foundation of his presentation was focusing holistically on the farm as an ecosystem driven with healthy soil and healthy crops. Starting with an overview of basic plant and soil functions, Michael explained the needs for a fungally dominant, minerally balanced soil to support fruit production and how to achieve that. He enlightened the audience with some of the tools, products and most importantly a schedule of applications to reduce insect and disease pressures and grow nutritious fruit. His experiences and ideas about marketing rounded out the seminar. Michael did a masterful job of introducing not just what he does on his and on his clients' farms ... but WHY!



Organic No-Till Farming

Andrew Mefferd, the editor of *Growing for the Market* magazine, and the author of *The Greenhouse and Hoophouse Grower's Handbook* and, most recently, *The Organic No-Till Farming Revolution*, was the presenter for this intensive. Andrew shared the findings of what he learned from his own farm experience in Maine and from a year and a half of visiting and interviewing almost 20 no-till farmers.

Andrew started by discussing the issues we face with tillage. He described tillage as like an earthquake, tornado or other devastating event to the world of microorganisms. It also burns up organic matter and brings up weed seeds from below the soil surface as well as requiring labor, time, fuel and equipment. He also shared that tillage is bad for the soil structure, soil chemistry and soil biology.

A basic requirement for no-till systems is some form of a mulch. Andrew organized the no-till techniques into three broad categories: non-biodegradable mulches that are removed for

production (tarping), mulch grown in place, and mulches that are left in place during production. Andrew has observed that most growers utilizing no-till techniques are using more than one method and some of the methods function as both soil prep and weed suppression.

Andrew suggests from his own experience that using combined pieces of various methods that and changing them around to work within our own situation of crops, soils, and resources will lead to a system that will work best for you.

Local Organic Herbs for Health

jim mcdonald (lower case at his request) was our presenter for our *Local Organic Herbs for Health* session. jim's goal was to connect some important human health opportunities and how they can be addressed using herbs as part of our diet. He helped us consider that rather than asking what the best herb is for this or that ailment, that we think of herbalism as a process that considers the constitution and needs of an individual, along with the diverse characteristics of the many edible plants we can harvest from the landscape or grow in our garden.



The importance of bitters (like radicchio or arugula) in our diet was the first example that jim used. That bitter flavor that many of us tend to avoid, and has been bred or selected out of many of our leafy greens and other crops, serves an important health role that often is not being met in our body. He made the case for why we need to eat plants with bitter flavors.

For the second key topic area, jim shared how we can use plant teas to support our gut health and gut microbiome. That included helping us to better understand the role of biology and bacteria in our digestive system. We learned about drying or moist (damp) actions, warming and cooling actions, and constricting or relaxing actions common in the energetics balancing aspects of western herbalism.

For the third key topic area, jim focused on eight common and readily available plants that can be used in our diet to help with digestion, reducing inflammation, and providing minerals and phytonutrients. In the final session, we got ideas about a variety of preparation methods for using herbs extracted with water (teas, decoction, oils (salves or ointment), or alcohol (tinctures)).

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 offered participants in the Orchardring session their choice of Michael Phillips' books *Mycorrhizal Planet* or *The Holistic Orchard*; participants in Andrew Mefferd's session got his new book *The Organic No-Till Farming Revolution*; and those in the Herbal session received a collection of jim mcdonald's writing on specific herbs as well as classes of herbs used for various purposes.

As part of the evaluation, we asked participants to identify knowledge or techniques they learned that they plan to put into practice, and over 69% of the respondents in Orchardring, 79% in No-Till, and 92% in the Herbs session took the time to do that. The information they provided will help us improve our future offerings.

We received many, many suggestions for future Intensives. Sixteen names were suggested for possible future presenters, the highest number to date. The four topics mentioned most often were permaculture, dealing with pests ranging from undesirable fungi to rabbits and deer, improving the soil, particularly the specifics of the soil food web, and homesteading and beginning farmer basics.

In addition to participant fees, the program was made possible by our Sponsors for 2020:

Whole Foods	OnMark Certification	Northern Natural Cider
North Central SARE	Services	House & Winery
Preferred First Insurance	GreenStone Farm Credit	Ruesink Organic Farms
Morgan Composting	Services	The Fertrell Co.
Blue River Organic Seed		Plymouth Orchards

Twelve people were registered with full-coverage scholarships made possible by a SARE mini-grant, but because of the weather only eight attended. Another eight people received registration fee subsidies of \$90 thanks to a generous donation by George and Anne Bird as well as our other sponsors.

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 2021. 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 9, 2021.

