

Kansas Specialty Crop Growers' News

Summer 2021

In the Summer Newsletter

I've been getting out and visiting KSCGA grower members around the state—putting some miles on my car visiting grower operations from Manhattan to Independence to Leavenworth to Hutchinson, and points in between. We're hoping to be out more in the coming weeks and months to see what you're doing and listen to your hopes and visions for growing in Garden City, Clay Center, and other places across Kansas.

In this Summer 2021 KSCGA Newsletter, we're sharing some of what we've seen in our travels around the state—from commercial and experimental mushroom operations to what is a growing vineyard and winery presence. I'm struck, though, by no matter how diverse and innovative the crops and practices might seem, specialty crop growers across Kansas share similar hopes, needs, and obstacles in working to reach their goals and aspirations.

Also in this season's newsletter are updates on a KSCGA-led Kansas Growers directory system to support and strengthen networking among growers and connect growers with customers, potential impacts and possibilities in solar energy projects in our state, and more.

We look forward to getting out and meeting more of you in the days and weeks ahead!



Peter Pierson, KSCGA Project Manager



More on mushroom growing in Kansas on page 3

Please [visit our website](#) for more information on KSCGA—and [join or renew your membership](#) today.

Upcoming Events:

- **KSCGA Board Meeting:** Wednesday July 28, 10:00 am, online: Contact info@kscga.org
- **KS Ag Summit-Specialty Crop Sector:** Thursday August 5, 7:00 pm, Zoom: kansasag.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJMsc

Vineyards and Wine Industry Growing in Kansas

Among the growing membership in KSCGA we've seen in 2021 are a notable number of vineyard and winery operators across the state. In talking with those involved in this arena, we've come to see that they share the same hopes and concerns with other fruit and vegetable growers in Kansas. There is, as one Kansas vineyard operator noted during a recent visit, strength in numbers to be found in a broad network of Kansas growers when it comes to policy, regulation, building production and market reach, and networking.



Vineyards at Bobwhite Vines—Hartford KS

While some might envision Kansas wines being fruit-based, or fruit flavored, to make up for assumed deficiencies in grapes grown in the midwestern plains, Kansas growers and wineries are producing remarkable red and white wines directly from grapes grown here in the Sunflower State. Some vineyards are finding grape varieties coming out of the upper Midwest, with Minnesota-sounding names like "Itasca," resilient and adaptable to the Kansas climate. Breeding programs in New York, the Dakotas, and other northern tier states continue to explore new varieties, many of which are finding Kansas offering a mix of cold, dormancy-inducing winters and the sunshine and growing season

(Kansas Grapes cont'ed on p 4)

Organizational Update—Kansas Grower Directory

Included in KSCGA's priority objectives is to develop an online Kansas specialty crop grower directory system, where growers can seek and share information on crops, growing techniques and strategies, storage and distribution, sales opportunities, and much more. While our [Facebook Group](#) has grown in participation in this kind of networking, our grower members have indicated that an enhanced, user-friendly networking platform would go a long way in helping growers work toward their production and sales goals.

In exploring existing directories and models, we've realized that to best serve the needs of our grower members while ensuring adequate management and safe control of data is to develop our own directory platform. In this, we are currently working with data management providers in creating a system that will enable grower members to connect and KSCGA to be much more effective in our outreach and programming.

To help us continue to build member engagement and support as we move ahead, we are asking you to become a member or renew your membership today.

Your \$10 membership contribution will add you to our growing membership numbers—numbers that clearly show the scale and impact of specialty crops, and the dedication of specialty crop growers, in Kansas. For those of you who are able, a \$50 Supporting

Membership contribution will go a long way as we look ahead in serving Kansas growers.

Sign up and make a membership contribution at kscga.org/membership or by mail with the form provided on pages 7-8.

Thanks—From all of us at KSCGA!



Kansas Fungi Entrepreneurs Finding High Demand Among Consumers, Restaurants

In what has often been a hobby, to some a passion, of foraging for edible wild mushrooms are the roots of a dynamic enterprise in growing delicacy mushrooms to serve an enthusiastic market in Kansas and surrounding area. While moving from growing and foraging for personal use to a larger scale commercial operation takes considerable know-how, time, and attention, some are seeing remarkable rewards in sales reach and potential.

KSCGA staff recently took the initiative to visit some of those in the Kansas mushroom growing arena—among them KSCGA grower member Chad Shifflett in Independence, KS.



Commercial mushroom growing—Chad Shifflett, Independence KS

Chad's growing operations, housed at TLC Nursery, consist of climate controlled growing chambers and sterile preparation and testing areas. A liquid solution of mycelium, the below-ground plant part of a mushroom system, is injected, or inoculated, into bags of a sterilized media of soybean hulls and hardwood pellets. These bags, with organized cuts made to allow the mushrooms to grow outward and reach for the light, are placed in shelves in the growing chambers. The entire process is carefully monitored to ensure bacteria and other contaminants don't form and spread, resulting

in the necessary disposal of a bag or entire crop.

Chad is finding a demand for his mushrooms in his home area, attributing it to an existing appreciation for things local. Ambitions for expansion, though, are fueled by interest in his delicacy mushrooms reaching discriminating chefs as far as Tulsa, OK.



K-State Horticulture hügelkultur sites may yield mushrooms

While Kansas State's Horticulture program, under the guidance of Jeremy Cowan, practices mushroom growing in these types of controlled environments, they are also looking at how mushrooms might be cultivated as a secondary product of [their hügelkultur efforts](#). Using raised rows of decaying wood, mulch, and other nutrient-rich organic materials, K-State's Willow Lake Student Farm is focused on how the raised rows' varying sun exposures impact growing seasons and freeze protection—in part by delaying blooming. As a secondary study, students and staff will be watching for mushrooms rising this autumn from mycelium and spores inherent in the organic material making up the raised beds.

I recently took home a box of cultivated Maitake, or Hen of the Wood, mushrooms from a farmers' market, thinking they would be great sautéed on a summer burger. One bite, though, and I realized, as many others have, that these mushrooms' rich flavor and consistency stand alone, deserving more than condiment status.

(Kansas Grapes—cont'ed from p 2)

days needed to properly ripen grapes. Vision for the future includes more regionally-developed grape varieties coming into cultivation and wine production in the years ahead, making for a uniquely Kansan product. With [climate change and the increasingly devastating fires in traditional growing areas in the West](#), some project that emerging grape and wine production in places like Kansas may fill voids in domestic supplies in the years ahead.



Early grapes—Bobwhite Vines—Hartford KS

Kansas vineyard operators utilize several options for producing wine from their grapes. The Kansas wine industry is seeing growth in farm wineries, where vineyard operators produce wine from their grapes on-site—with many offering agritourism with tastings, events, tours, and more. Others sell their grapes to or contract with regional wineries for the winemaking and distribution processes.

Be careful, though, when you consider buying a “Kansas” wine. Growers caution that some wines made in Kansas, some even marketed with Kansas themes, may be made from little, if any, Kansas grapes. It is not uncommon, and in some instances necessary for certain wine varieties, for wineries marketing Kansas wine to purchase grapes from other parts of the country. While some may disagree on just what percentage of a wine should come from Kansas grapes to be called a Kansas wine, it’s safe to say the more the better for the industry to continue to expand

in the state. Strengthening relationships between growers and wineries will be a key part in the success of Kansas vineyards—and we, as consumers and fellow growers, can offer our voices, and our choices, in helping to make that happen.

Alongside vineyard and wine production is a community college viticulture (cultivation of grapes) and enology (study of wines) program preparing the next generation of growers and wine makers in Kansas and beyond. Under the direction of Scott Kohl and his experienced staff, Highland Community College-Wamego has seen remarkable success and growth not only in their training students, but in supporting beginning Kansas winemaking entrepreneurs with facilities, equipment, and expertise at their Wamego site.



A small part of Highland Community College/Highland Vineyards and Winery production facilities

With the start of their Associate of Science and Technical Certificate program in 2010, Highland CC’s vineyards and wineries now draw students from across Kansas and surrounding states and has realized remarkable sustainability and growth.

For those who may be inclined to indulge their senses in a good wine, a Kansas wine made with Kansas grapes offers a genuinely good addition to your table, your fall gathering around a fire, or an event on your farm.

And do, please, share a bottle and spread the word!

Proposed Solar Farm May Set Model for Likely Expansion in Kansas

NextEra Energy's proposed 3,500-acre \$320 million solar project in rural Johnson County is making its way through preliminary regulatory and zoning processes. [Promoted as providing clean energy, jobs, and financial benefits for landowner lessors, the proposed project has also raised some concerns](#) among growers and others in the vicinity of the project. Set to be the largest solar project in the state, there are possibilities that in setting a sound model in the Johnson County project, likely solar energy expansion in the state can be done that offer opportunities for specialty crops and compatible land uses.



Photo Credit: clayandmilk.com/2021/03/25/nextera-energy-plans...

The area targeted for the solar project, the rural-urban fringe surrounding Gardner and vicinities, has seen remarkable impact from the expansion of nearby railroad freight intermodal facilities and suburban sprawl. Specialty crop operations can serve as a buffer to this kind of sprawl and industrialization of rural communities. The proposed 3,500-acre project brings another demand on what is an already vulnerable supply of land in the area.

There are, however, a number of models of solar projects being implemented that support and share land use with smaller scale agriculture, native vegetation restoration, and reestablishing pollinators. In a November 2020 [Renewable Energy Magazine](#) feature, [research on combining growing operations with solar projects, or agrivoltaics, has shown promise](#). Among the

crop varieties found to be better suited for growing amidst, even underneath, solar panels are tomatoes, peppers, and herbs, some of our more prominent specialty crops. When solar panels were adequately spaced, yields in these shared locations were nearly identical to nearby traditional growing environments. The additional income offered by leasing land to solar panel energy projects may give growers a needed boost to build their cultivation efforts.

Land shared with [solar projects can also provide a means to restore native vegetation and pollinator populations](#). Active planting and restoration can yield native grasses, shrubs, and flowering plants that support pollinators—and offer opportunities for our beekeepers and honey producers. Given the trend in extreme temperatures affecting fruit crops and pollinator-dependent plants, solar panels may delay blooming, which can reduce damage by late season freezes.



Photo Credit: www.anthropocenemagazine.org/2021/05/solar-panel...

KSCGA will be monitoring the Johnson County Solar Project and working to ensure specialty crop land use is taken into consideration. Note: Attempts to reach officials with NextEra Energy through contacts given have to date been unsuccessful.

More on the Johnson County Solar Project at:

www.nexteraenergyresources.com/west-gardner-solar

www.kcur.org/news/2021-05-01/kansas-lags-in-solar...

on potentials for land sharing, or agrivoltaics:

www.startribune.com/pollinator-friendly-landscape...

Guidance for landowners leasing to solar projects:

landgate.com/news/2020/10/21/solar-energy...

More From our Visits with KSCGA Grower Members



Remarkable organic kale production—Teck Farms—
Hutchinson KS



Firefly Farm—Wichita KS



Ornamentals, herbs, and aromatics make for an intense hot summer's day high tunnel—Romney Farms—Cassoday KS

We're scheduling visits in the coming weeks to the Garden City area and other parts of our state. Drop us a line if you can help coordinate visits in your area: info@kscga.org.

Survey Seeks to Build Awareness of Specialty Crops and Focus Programs to Serve Growers

To build awareness of the impact specialty crops have in Kansas and to better serve Kansas growers, KSCGA is distributing a short survey to gather information on grower efforts and vision in the state. Your taking a few minutes to [complete this short \(9 questions\) Kansas Grower Survey](#) will greatly help in focusing programs and funding opportunities.

Information from the survey will be used to ensure we best serve Kansas growers in our programming and in Kansas and federal administrative, legislative, and funding arenas. Specialty crops can seem at a disadvantage vying against other agriculture and land use. The information we gather from this survey will help put specialty crops, and specialty crop growers, in a more prominent light in Kansas.

Do note that information regarding the scale of your cultivation efforts will be confidential and used toward a cumulative tally of crops and acreage in the state.

KSCGA Membership

Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association is a grower-driven 501(c)(5) agriculture organization of fruit, vegetable, ornamental and aromatics, and fiber growers; vineyard and winery operators; apiarists; and others dedicated to promoting specialty crops—and specialty crop growers—in Kansas. With origins in a merger of Kansas fruits and vegetable grower networks to better serve the industry, we continue to build our capacity to serve our grower members.

To join or renew your membership with KSCGA, please complete and submit membership form online at www.kscga.org/membership; or print and complete the form below and return it with a \$10 membership contribution to:

Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association
35230 W 135th St.
Olathe, KS 66061

Farm Name _____

First and Last Name _____

Additional People with your Farm:

Address _____

City _____ **State** _____ **Zip/Postal Code** _____

County _____

Email _____ **Phone** _____

Website _____

Crops—What specialty crops do you grow? (ex: heirloom tomatoes, herbs, fruits, nuts, etc.)

Acres in Specialty Crop Production _____

How do you market? (*Farmer's Markets, CSA, Online, Restaurants, Grocery Stores, Food Hub, etc.*)

Would you prefer paperless newsletters and correspondence? (Circle One) Yes No

Tell us a bit about why you're a KSCGA member? What are your hopes and vision for your growing operations? How might KSCGA serve you in reaching your goals?

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