

VABF Conference Agenda

Sunday, January 11, 2026

SESSION E 8:30AM – 10:00AM	
Planning Woodlot Management By AmyRose Foll	As a woodlot owner, you may have thought from time to time about the future of your woodland and what you might do to improve its condition and value. Most woodland owners use their property for recreation, a place to hunt and view wildlife, or as a family legacy to pass on to the next generation. Forests change on their own every day in small and cumulative ways. Eventually, you become aware of these changes. A basic understanding of forest processes depends on a working knowledge of ecology. This helps us understand how forests change and how management decisions affect forest values.
Organic Processing and Handling: On-Farm, In-Store, and Everything In-Between By Wren Frueh and Maggie Saska	Organic processing (and handling) can encompass a wide range of activities from production of on-farm value added products, resale of organic goods from other operations and more. There is a shortage of certified Organic processing across Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic, which limits what organic markets are available to small and mid-size farmers and producers. This session will discuss the details of a processing/handling certification, when it's needed, highlights and bottle necks in becoming a certified organic processor/handler.
CSA Design and Administration By Michelle McKenzie	Over her 11 years at Bellair Farm, Michelle has managed four styles of CSA: 100% free choice market style, 100% farmer's choice, and two hybrid-choice models. The Farm's CSA also operates a Pick-Your-Own Field, which is a part of the CSA share. CSA can be a great way to farm, but we need to remember that we are in charge of the design of the CSA and how we design it will have just as big an impact on the season as growing conditions. In this presentation, Michelle will outline multiple CSA designs and point out opportunities for customization to make your CSA model fit your farm. Topics covered will be: basic CSA structure/design, CSA administration (sales, billing, pickup logistics), CSA communication (newsletters, marketing), ways to make your CSA stand out, and crop planning and field management for CSA harvest.
Advanced Techniques for Managing Soil Fertility for Organic Vegetable Production By Alex Hessler	This session will cover advanced soil fertility management strategies for organic vegetable production in fields and high tunnels. The focus will be on techniques used and challenges encountered at Riverstone Organic Farm, a 15-acre diversified organic farm with 1.5 acres of high tunnels. Multiple approaches to soil and plant tissue testing and interpretation provide a basis for addressing nutrient deficiencies in the short and long-term. Liming, cover crops, compost, bulk raw chicken litter and appropriate tillage bring the soil into optimum condition. Pre-plant applications of a variety of organic amendments provide crops with needed nutrients for the growing season. Fertigation and foliar feeding with nutrients and biostimulants generates extended harvests and plant vigor.

Tunnel Troubles for Flower Farmers By Chelsea Belle Graves	Considering adding high tunnels to your flower production? Join Chelsea as she guides you through selecting the right tunnel for your farm. Discover her crop management techniques and seasonal strategies to maximize profitability throughout the year. Chelsea will also cover essential tunnel and soil care practices to ensure the longevity of your infrastructure, helping you get the most out of your investment.
No Farmer, No Farm: A Maintenance Guide to Self-Preservation By Ann Mooney	Octogenarians are Agrarians! This workshop offers a practical primer on ergonomics, injury prevention, functional anatomy, and strategies for recovery and fortification. Designed for those facing the physical demands of agricultural and everyday work, the session emphasizes how to maintain strength, mobility, and resilience while balancing personal well-being with external responsibilities. Participants will explore methods to address unique physical needs before they become overwhelming, drawing on both scientific research and personal observation. The presenter will highlight how science often advances ahead of mainstream medical practice and provide clear, evidence-based approaches to support long-term health. Attendees will leave with tools to sustain productivity, protect their bodies, and cultivate habits that promote endurance and the opportunity to outlive your mortgage!
Alliums Year-Round By Pam Dawling	You can grow onions or some of their relatives in every month of the year in the mid-Atlantic. As well as bulb onions and garlic, this workshop includes leeks, perennial alliums, scallions, garlic scapes, elephant garlic, shallots, pickling onions, and many unusual alliums. This workshop covers planting, caring for the crops, harvesting, storage (when possible) and saving seed stock for replanting.
From Farm to Pantry: Sustainable Food Systems and Community Engagement By Shannon Hardwicke, Sean Dougherty, Brad Collier, and Alix Mallard	This is a presentation exploring the critical connection between sustainable agriculture and community food security that will highlight the importance of collaborative efforts between farmers, food banks, and community organizations in building resilient food systems. Attendees will gain an understanding of sustainable agriculture practices supporting local food security, effective models for food banks and pantries, community engagement and education initiatives, and innovative solutions for reducing food waste and increasing access to nutritious food.
SESSION F 10:30AM – 12:00PM	
Integrating Biodynamic Principles in a Small Market Garden By Jeff Poppen	A well-designed garden can be inviting, interesting and enchanting, along with efficiently producing crops. We'll discuss cover crops, composting, companion planting, crop rotation, tillage options, mulching, and using biodynamic preparations. Besides practical information about drainage, remineralization and weed control, participants will delve into cosmic rhythms, biochemistry and homeopathy to help understand how to grow food of the highest quality.
Meet the Microorganisms By Krisi Olivero	Join Alter Eco Farms as we dive deep into the microscope to learn about all of the microorganisms that live beyond our vision, in the soil. We will discuss common categories of soil microorganisms, learning about their identification and function. We will learn about how microorganisms naturally create nutrient cycling for plants and the many other benefits the baby microbes provide. We will look at several samples under the microscope

	<p>(projected on the big screen so that everyone can see) and compare different samples from the area to draw some conclusions about the state of soil in the south. Once we've gotten attached to our cute and very helpful microscopic friends, we will talk about what exactly happened to all the microbes and how we can work to get them back and restore the nutrient balance of our soils.</p>
<p>Winter Peas: New Possibilities on the Horizon</p> <p>By Jason Myers-Benner</p>	<p>You may know winter peas as a fall-planted winter cover crop, but new breeding work is bringing the possibility of expanding the kinds and purposes of winter-hardy peas to include snap, snow, shelling, improved cover crop, and dry pea (grain) types. Learn about the current results of our SARE grant to study and develop some grain-type winter peas we have bred on our farm as companion plants to wheat. You'll see why overwintered peas are worth developing and will get a sense of what's coming up over the next few years as a result of the breeding efforts of the few of us nationally who are working with winter peas. Come learn simple ways you could get involved and help out!</p>
<p>Passing the Plow: Land Access & Financing for the Next Generation</p> <p>By Gabi Salazar, Allie King, Grace Summers, and Darrell K. Tennie</p>	<p>How do you move from wanting farmland to owning it? While retiring farmers may seek to pass land on to the next generation, rising costs and development pressures make access challenging. This session highlights both the obstacles and the support available to help you evaluate options and achieve your goals. Grace Summers and Gabi Salazar of American Farmland Trust will share resources such as free one-on-one support, distressed borrower assistance, and microgrant opportunities. Darrell Tennie, CEO of The Tennie Group, will discuss business and finance strategies to guide land access decisions. Allie King, Loan Officer with Farm Credit of the Virginias, will outline coaching and educational resources, along with what to expect when pursuing a loan. Emily Tybur of FoodShed Capital will present equitable operational loan opportunities. Together, presenters will provide practical tools to help you take the next step in your land access and farm business journey.</p>
<p>Integrating Pastured Poultry and Vegetable Production</p> <p>By Nathan Ratchen and Michelle McKenzie</p>	<p>Presenters will discuss the nuts and bolts of managing large scale laying flocks, the role of cover and forage crops in the health of your poultry, and the benefits of stacking poultry systems with vegetable production. There will be an overview of food safety guidelines, and the practical lived experience of the do's and don'ts of poultry, followed by an overview of the financials of poultry at Bellair. This session is appropriate for every type of producer, whether a seasoned vegetable farm interested in poultry, an existing multi-enterprise farm, or 1st year farmer getting started raising birds. Come learn from Bellair Farm's decade of successes and mistakes in combining these two enterprises.</p>
<p>Starting a Syntropic Agroforestry System</p> <p>By Steven Wilder</p>	<p>This session will describe first steps in growing a syntropic agroforestry system from design considerations to site work, to plant selection and planting, to management. Money, effort, and time saving strategies will be provided based on the instructor's decade-long experience developing a syntropic system. Attendees will learn syntropic farming basics and understand the importance of starting strong when going syntropic.</p>

From Coop to Clicks: How to Make Your Farm Internet Famous By Handsome Hen Farm	What started last year as a simple way to sell more of our farm fresh pasture-raised eggs online has turned into what we lovingly refer to as “the chicken empire.” As a small farm in a small town, we had accumulated a handful of local followers (plus family and friends) who bought our eggs. But we wanted to grow our business and have consistent customers. So how did we expand our social media following to currently almost 30K, and experience so much demand for our all-natural eggs that we sell out weekly and consistently have a wait list? Also, our social media posts generate respectable income for our farm. How did we do all of this in a little over a year by selling only eggs and by making funny videos of our chickens? More importantly, how can you do it, too? Come find out!
Expanding your Farm's Distribution Network: Promises, Pitfalls, and Possibilities By Corey Davis	This session will address the need to expand sales opportunities for local products while examining the challenges that often hinder market access. To ground the discussion, findings from a pre-event survey of farmers and retailers will highlight key barriers and opportunities. The workshop will also showcase success stories from organizations that have developed effective models for increasing distribution. With a regional focus, attention will be given to initiatives in Virginia, including 4P Food and the Eastern Food Hub Collaborative, alongside exploration of additional creative strategies. Participants will gain insights into practical approaches and collaborative solutions that can strengthen local food systems and improve market reach for producers.
SESSION G 2:00PM – 3:30PM	
The Organic Research Hub: Delivering Science-Based Practical Information to Organic and Biological Producers By Mark Schonbeck	The Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) has developed a searchable database of research outcomes that address priority challenges encountered by organic farmers and ranchers. Our Organic Research Hub (https://hub.ofrf.org/) covers organic management of soil health and fertility, crops, livestock, weeds, pests, diseases, and other challenges. The Hub is a living document that grows as new science emerges. This session will open with a 30-minute presentation on the nuts and bolts of this new tool, how to use it, and how it relates to other information resources in the organic sector. During the remaining hour, we will utilize the Hub to address topics and queries from session participants. Bring your most burning questions and greatest production challenges and get real, practical assistance today!
Mushrooms as a Regenerative Farm Enterprise By Christopher Parker	Mushrooms offer a unique way to add value to your farm — turning waste into wealth while restoring ecosystems and feeding your community. This workshop focuses on the business model of mushroom farming, not the cultivation techniques. We'll break down startup costs, product opportunities, and profit margins to help you build a realistic plan. If you're seeking a crop that supports soil, people, and your farm's future, fungi may be the answer.
Effective Strategies for Farm Diversification	Immanuel will deliver a dynamic 90-minute session sharing his journey of farm diversification. Drawing from his success transforming a four-acre estate in Durham, NC, into a thriving agritourism hub since 2017, he will outline strategies for sustainable growth through value added products, agritourism,

By Immanuel Jarvis	educational offerings, becoming a subject matter expert, leveraging social media, and more. He will offer examples of how Jireh Family Farm has expanded by using farm-to-table dinners, summer camps, and herbal classes, emphasizes community engagement to boost revenue. Attendees learn actionable diversification techniques rooted in Jarvis's experience, empowering small farms to thrive through innovation and community-focused initiatives.
The Economic Viability of Adding Perennial Fruit to a Small Market Garden By Heather Coiner and Stasia Greenewalt	Adding perennial fruit plantings is one way a small market vegetable garden can diversify economically and biologically. But most fruit-growing guidance is aimed at large conventional growers. We wanted to know which fruit crops and varieties are best suited to a small (< 1 acre) low- or no-spray planting, and how their economics work out when added to an existing market vegetable operation. We surveyed 10 market farms with fruit plantings in the Mid-Atlantic and have used the information to prepare enterprise budgets for the most popular crops. This project was generously funded by the American Farmland Trust and carried out in collaboration with SG Farm Services and Plant to Profit.
Seed Saving and Plant Breeding (On Any Scale) By Ben Casteel	Seed saving is an important aspect of biological farming and has become even more so as we adapt to a changing climate. Plant breeding, although often deemed out of reach for many growers, is only a step beyond seed saving. This session will describe the importance of saving seeds and how we can simplify plant breeding to make it accessible to any grower on any scale. Topics will include selection, cross-pollination, isolation techniques, and propagation that will assist in maintaining lines and breeding new varieties adapted to your growing conditions. Participants will walk away with a guide to backyard breeding because now more than ever we need YOU to save seed and breed!
An Ecological Toolkit for Supporting Biodiversity and Resilience On Your Farm By Steven Haring	This session will highlight some of the ecological principles that link biodiversity to resilience and address how they apply in an agricultural context. We will focus on the diversity-stability hypothesis, diversity indices, symbiotic relationships (especially competition and mutualism), ecosystem services, resource cycling, disturbance, and plant population dynamics. Then, we will use a multi-scale framework to understand how certain management practices can build "useful biodiversity" on your farm landscape, including practices like intercropping, cover crops, integrated pest management, microbial inoculants, and landscape diversification. We will conclude with an interactive session where participants can evaluate and discuss the biodiversity-enhancing practices from their own operations.
Organic Integrated Pest Management (IPM) By Tomia MacQueen	This workshop will cover many of the methods available to protect your produce from common pests and critters without the use of harmful synthetic chemicals. We'll cover companion planting, crop rotation, inter-cropping, natural and OMRI listed products as well as livestock integration and more.
Diversify Your Farm with Alley Cropping By Stesha Warren	Alley cropping is the planting of rows of trees and/or shrubs to create alleys within which agricultural or horticultural crops are produced. Trees may include hardwood or softwood timber, fruit and nut trees, or other specialty crop trees and shrubs. It is a lesser known agroforestry practice gaining in popularity with

	potential for diversifying land use, expanding income potential, building soil health plus many other benefits. Join agroforestry technical trainer, Stesha Warren, to learn about the principles, design considerations, benefits, and potential challenges associated with alley cropping.
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Additional sessions and activities will be added to the agenda as they are confirmed.

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