

Conservation Kaleidoscope

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Meet Your Farmer 2026



On Thursday, June 18, more than 80 people traveled to Mishawaka for the District's 3rd Annual *Meet Your Farmer* community gathering. This year's event was hosted at The Blueberry Ranch, one of the oldest u-pick blueberry operations in the Midwest.



We could not have asked for better weather—bright blue skies and cool temperatures created the perfect backdrop for the evening. After guests finished their meals, Sarah Longenecker led a discussion on soil health, emphasizing the role of stormwater and comparing how rainfall behaves on greenspaces versus developed urban areas. We were especially fortunate to have the NRCS Soil Health Trailer on-site to demonstrate how living roots and covered soil improves rainwater infiltration and reduces erosion.



Next, attendees heard from John Nelson, who has owned The Blueberry Ranch since 1981. John shared stories from decades of farming and answered questions about managing a u-pick operation. Speaking on soil health, he explained that early in his career he focused heavily on adjusting nutrient levels until an organic mentor told him, "You cannot have the chemistry without the biology." Today, the farm's soil is so biologically active that after a rain, there are too many earthworms along the drives to walk without stepping on them—some can even be found three feet deep.



Guests also learned several interesting facts about u-pick blueberry production. Many of the bushes at The Blueberry Ranch date back to the farm's beginnings in the 1950s and are still thriving. When asked how they handle birds eating the ripe berries, John simply replied, "We share."

Overall, the evening was both educational and enjoyable. We appreciate everyone who joined us and helped make the event a success. Thank you to John Nelson, Martha Pence, and the entire Blueberry Ranch team for your hospitality. And thank you to all the legislators, conservation partners, farmers, and community members who participated. Together, we can protect our natural resources and ensure healthy soil and clean water for generations to come.



Protecting Soil
Preserving Water
Serving Community

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SMIPP Land Stewards

Invasive Species Removal Support Group

Managing invasive species can feel overwhelming, and many of us are facing similar challenges across the county. That's why the St. Joseph–Marshall Counties Invasive Plant Partnership (SMIPP) created the Land Stewards group: to give landowners, homeowners, and nature-minded community members a welcoming space to connect, learn, and support one another in caring for Indiana's natural landscapes.

The group offers a place to share personal experiences—from stubborn patches of honeysuckle to the unexpected victories of restoring native wildflowers. Members can ask questions, compare management techniques, and hear what's working for others. Discussions include tool recommendations, seasonal tips, safe herbicide use, and ways to prevent invasive species from spreading. SMIPP emphasizes ecological stewardship and long-term restoration, helping participants understand not just how to remove invasives, but why these actions matter for soil health, wildlife habitat, and community resiliency.

The Land Stewards have met twice so far, and both gatherings have been a great success. Each meeting brought together like-minded individuals eager to talk native plants, habitat restoration, and effective invasive species control. The enthusiasm at the events has made it clear: there is strong local interest in protecting our natural areas, and people are excited to network with one another.

As the group continues to grow, SMIPP hopes to continue offering opportunities to build a network of well-supported land stewards across St. Joseph and Marshall Counties. Whether you are just beginning to tackle invasives or have years of experience, you're welcome here—every voice adds value, and every effort contributes to a healthier Indiana landscape.

If you'd like to join the next gathering or learn more about the Land Stewards group, keep an eye out for SMIPP updates or reach out—we'd love to have you involved. www.SMIPP.org - info@SMIPP.org

Walk on the Wild Side!

at the St. Joseph County 4-H Fair

Join us as for a

Celebration of Conservation!



July 7, 2026

1 pm to 4 pm

by the Nature Center



Activities along the path & presentations at the gazebo! Fun for the whole family!



Mishawaka Land Stewards Meeting in June



Project Learning Tree Workshop

Project Learning Tree (PLT) is an award-winning environmental education initiative designed for educators, parents and community leaders working with youth from Kindergarten to 12th grade.

On Thursday, July 30, Shirley Heinze Land Trust and the St. Joseph SWCD are hosting this 1-day training for **teachers, educators, and community partners involved with the City of South Bend's Urban Tree Canopy Initiative.**

Use the QR code to sign up for this free event, or contact us for more information!



Benefits of Perennial Farms

This year's Meet Your Farmer highlighted a local u-pick farm, offering a fresh perspective on conservation and the ecological benefits of an organic, perennial operation—quite different from topics we've covered in the past. Perennial crops like blueberries can live and produce for decades without replanting. In urban spaces, that longevity makes them a powerful investment in local food security, climate resilience, and green infrastructure.

Pollinators and Wildlife Habitat

Organic perennial farms provide multiple long-term ecological benefits for pollinators and wildlife. These farms provide as stable, reliable habitat in an urban area, and act as a corridor, allowing for connection between parks, riparian areas, and other greenspaces. They also provide structural habitat for pollinators and wildlife, like perches for birds and space for ground-nesting bees.



Stormwater Management

Development directly impacts the natural water cycles, making urban farms a powerful tool in stormwater management. Vegetated areas slow water movement, allowing for more water to infiltrate the soil. This reduces runoff and erosion, and lowers the burden on municipal storm drains. Also, the roots act as filters, reducing the amount of pollutants reaching our streams and groundwater.



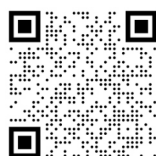
Urban Greenspace

Integrating perennial agriculture into urban centers provides environmental benefits that contribute to climate resilience. Perennial fields, orchards, and berry patches maintain permanent root networks and extensive above-ground biomass, providing constant shading and cooling the environment. Large root networks trap carbon underground, and the plants act as air filters.

Native Plant Kits - Fall Sale

Our fall native plant sale is back! Choose from five different kits - Basic Prairie, Shade, Monarch Garden, Prairie Grass and Rain Garden. Kits come with 50 plugs and are a mix of native grasses, flowers, and sedges designed for an extended period of bloom time. One kit will cover about 100 square feet when planted 18 inches on center.

Kits are \$150 each, plus tax, and orders must be placed by July 30th. Pick up will be the first week of September. You can find the order form on our website.



www.stjosephswcd.org/native-plant-kits



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St. Joseph County Soil & Water Conservation Partnership

St. Joseph County SWCD Partnership Staff

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Shelley Chaffee, SWCD
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Nathaniel Ness, Vice Chairman
Marty Lappin
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Chuck Lehman
Randy Matthys
Richard Schmidt
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Mike Burkholder
Scott Laidig
Joe Gregory

SWCD Honorary Members:

Keith Lineback

Farm Service Agency Staff

Gideon Nobbe, CED
Devan Harrell
Diane Stichter
Michael Cuff

Calendar

July

3rd - Independence Day (observed) -
Office Closed

7th - Natural Resources Day at the Fair

21st - Board Meeting



August

18th - Board Meeting



*Meet Your
Farmer
2026*

Visit our website & watch Facebook for info on events and more!

Go Green!

Choose to get your newsletter by email!
Use the QR Code or email us at info@stjosephswcd.org.
Be sure to include your mailing address!

