

2026 NCAC4 annual report

Dates: June 7-10, 2026

Host: University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture (UADA), Department of Horticulture

Location: Fayetteville, AR

Participants: Vance Baird (Michigan State University); Amit Dhingra (Texas A&M University); Christopher Gunter (University of Florida); Doug Karcher (The Ohio State University); Desmond Layne (Auburn University); Leonardo Lombardini (University of Georgia); Steven Lommel (North Carolina State University); Martha Mamo (University of Nebraska-Lincoln); Ajay Nair (Iowa State University); Aaron J Patton (Purdue University); Karen Sanguinet (South Dakota State University); Patricia Stock (Oregon State University); Jane Schuh (Project Advisor – Kansas State University)

2026 Host: Iowa State University chaired by Dr. Ajay Nair

Meeting Highlights

The annual NCAC4 meeting brings together department heads/chairs from across the nation, providing an opportunity to discuss ongoing issues in programs and promote forward thinking and strategizing on topics and areas in horticulture that need more attention. This year, attendees met in Fayetteville, AR with administrators and horticulture faculty in the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture (UADA) and attended the Arkansas Blackberry Field Day in Clarksville, AR. Attendees learned about UADA's specialty crop and turfgrass production and fruit breeding research and extension programming, undergraduate and graduate programs, and discussed benchmarking, trends, opportunities, and challenges among departments.

Keynote Presentations:

- NIFA and Administrative Advisor Update (Jane Schuh)
- Welcome by Dean Jeff Edwards, College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences (AFLS)
- Presentation and discussion, "Successful collaborations; How to develop successful multi-disciplinary and multi-state research teams" by Sr. Associate Vice President for Agriculture - Research and Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, Dr. JF Meullenet, University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture (UADA)
- Discussion about recruitment and enrollment trends with Associate AFLS Dean, Dr. Jackie Mosley
- Presentation and discussion, "Preliminary Evaluation of Horticulture Degree Programs of Horticulture," University Professor, Dr. Curt Rom

Tours:

- Center for Arkansas Farms and Food (CAFF) - Introduction to Horticulture Ag Experiment Station program from CAFF Director Heather Friedrich
- Turf plot tour and research update from Drs. Wendell Hutchens and Mike Richardson
- Tour of "Long-cane blackberry production in containers research" with Dr. Ryan Dickson

Field Day participation: Blackberry Field Day at the Fruit Research Station, Clarksville, AR

The field involved the following activities, presentations, and field tours:

- Blackberry taste tasting, blackberry fruit disorders, blackberry leaf tissue nutrient sampling, insect, and mite ID
- Speakers included Dr. Jackie Lee, Director Fruit Research Station; Les Dozier, President of AR Blackberry Growers Assoc.; Dr. J.F. Meullenet, Sr. Associate Vice President for Agriculture - Research and Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station; Dr. John Anderson, Sr. Associate Vice President for Agriculture-Extension and Director of the Cooperative Extension Service
- Blackberry Month Proclamation from Arkansas Department of Agriculture

Keynote presentations of Blackberries in the Southeast and Around the World (highlights from invited guests):

- Thrips and Mite Pests in North Carolina Blackberries, Lorena Lopez North Carolina State University, and Aaron Cato, UADA
- Key Blackberry Research Updates from Georgia, Zilfina Rubio, University of Georgia
- A Cultural History of Brambles, Harry Smith University of Bristol, United Kingdom
- Status of Blackberries in South Carolina and Upcoming Research, Melissa Muñoz, Clemson University
- Blackberry Production in Florida: Industry Overview & Research Advances, Muhammad Adnan Shahid, University of Florida

Field Tours:

- Long-Cane Blackberry Research Updates, Dr. Ryan Dickson, UADA
- Updates on Robotic Harvesting, Drs. Anthony Gunderman and Renee Threlfall, UADA
- Tour of Advanced Blackberry Selections, Dr. Margaret Worthington, UADA

University Highlights

Accomplishments with short-term outcomes, outputs, activities, milestones, and impacts

University of Arkansas:

- The University of Arkansas Department of Horticulture hired a new instructor, Ms. Sarah Paschal, in August 2025 and a new weed science Extension specialist for turfgrass science and forage management who will start early in 2027. One faculty member, Dr. Matt Bertucci, was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 2026.
- Undergraduate enrollment was 61 students with 14 graduating and graduate student enrollment was 23 with four students graduating in 2025-2026.
- The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Arkansas recognized University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture (UADA) Extension High Tunnel Instructor, Ms. Taunya Ernst, with the State Conservationist's Partnership Award for her leadership in advancing high tunnel agriculture. The Arkansas Green Industry Association recognized Dr. Anthony Bowden, Extension Nursery and Greenhouse Production Specialist, for his continued educational programming in support of the association. Dr. Amanda McWhirt received the UADA John W. White Outstanding Extension State Faculty Award in 2025.
- Dr. Margaret Worthington and her graduate student, Isabella Vaughn, led a project conducted in association with the VitisGen3 Project and [Vitis-x-Muscadinia](#), which are funded by the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, a USDA National Institute of Food and

Agriculture federal grant program. They published research with colleagues at Cornell University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Gardens Alive! and E&J Gallo Winery validating genetic markers for predicting flower sex type and seedlessness in muscadines and other grapes. This development will reduce time and save resources in the development of new grape varieties, including seedless muscadines.

Auburn University:

- Enrollment: 160 undergrads (90 in HORT majors; 70 in Ag Science); 50 pursuing an undergraduate minor in HORT; 42 grad students
- 2025 Ph.D.'s degrees awarded = 5; M.S. degrees awarded = 11
- Pending faculty search for 100% Teaching, full-time, non-tenure track Lecturer; requested position for 9-month, tenure-track, specialty crop weed scientist (75% research/25% teaching)
- Children's garden at the Auburn University Transformation Garden (16-acre site) should open by end of June: <https://agriculture.auburn.edu/hort/transformation-garden.php>
- Faculty/staff took occupancy of new STEM-AG Complex (new multi-department, 3-building complex) with new labs, offices and teaching spaces: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQbKXXeJ7pQ>
- Dr. Carolyn Robinson – Teaching Award of Merit (NACTA); Dr. Camila Rodrigues – Selected for the Fruit + Vegetable 40 Under 40 Awards, Class of 2025, presented by Fruit + Vegetable Magazine, recognizing emerging leaders in the produce industry
- 1.5 ac Children's Garden currently under construction, to complete end of April 2026
Live webcam: https://www.youtube.com/live/0I6vTpwmvDk?si=Z4G2Ab_EjVoGdnRT
- ~2-acre fruit garden site - ground prepared, trellises installed, planting Fall 2026
- State-of-the-art greenhouse/aquaponics project - \$4M budget approved, finalizing designs anticipating 2026 construction

University of Florida:

- Horticultural Sciences at the University of Florida remains strong. Hiring remains good, with two new faculty hires in 2025 and 2026.
- We recently opened a new Crop Transformation Center to focus plant expertise in advanced transformation techniques paired with elite germplasm development in the breeding program.
- We celebrated the retirement of Dr. Jeff Brecht, Postharvest Physiologist, for his forty years of service. We also mourn the loss of Dr. Andrew Hanson, Endowed Professor, and member of the National Academy of Sciences.
- The Environmental Horticulture Department has closed and faculty from that department have moved their tenure homes to alternative departments, but the vast majority of them joined the Horticultural Sciences department. This results in a total of 88 faculty members, with 53 being at the main campus location in Gainesville and 35 at ten Research and Education Centers across the state from the northwest panhandle near Pensacola to the southernmost point at Homestead.

University of Georgia:

- Undergraduate program has been losing students in the past three years. This AY numbers were 49 majors and 48 minors.
- Graduate program continues to grow, with a record number of students enrolled (57 – 22 M.S. and 35 Ph.D.).
- Three faculty members hired, a Peach Extension Specialist, a Director of Science and Conservation, and an Assistant Professor in Socio-horticulture and Horticultural Therapy. The last two are shared with the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. One faculty member retired. The total number of faculty members is 38 (including two full-time administrators).
- Faculty submitted grant proposals for a total of \$23.3M, \$4.1M awarded.
- Established the “NeSmith Professor of Blueberry Breeding” endowment.
- Strong international engagement and faculty recognition, including ASHS Outstanding Graduate Educator Award, ASHS Outstanding Leadership and Administration Award, SR-ASHS Paul Smeal Leadership and Administration Award, ASHS Fellow, Fellow of the National Academy of Inventors, Senior Member of the National Academy of Inventors, SR-ASHS Henry Covington Extension Award, ASHS-SR Julian C. Miller Distinguished Research Award.

Michigan State University:

- Stable undergraduate and graduate enrollment (albeit a dip in international students).
- Hired T/S Tree (Stone) Fruit Physiologist (Asst. Prof.).
- Wrapping up Chairperson search.
- General Fund cuts removed all ‘operating’ dollars from that funding line.
- Perform well in context of national benchmarking (Academic Analytics).

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

- The University has experienced a year of significant leadership transition and institutional change (new President; UNL's Chancellor departed following a vote of no confidence), contributing to a challenging period marked by budget reductions, departmental restructuring, and organizational uncertainty.
- Digital Agriculture has been proposed as an IANR Operational Strategic Initiative.
- *IANR Digital Agriculture Hub*: A statewide survey identified approximately 35 digital agriculture technologies that producers are aware of or currently use.
 - Most frequently cited barriers to adoption were that limited information demonstrates the value and return on investment of digital agriculture technologies and lack of a sufficiently trained workforce.
 - Plans are underway to strengthen public-private partnerships to accelerate technology development and adoption (e.g., N-FARMS initiative)
- The Department of Agronomy and Horticulture department currently has 68 faculty. Approximately five faculty members are expected to participate in the voluntary separation program and retire by June 30.
- The department's 3+1 program with Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University in China was discontinued in 2025.

- Undergraduate enrollment is 179 students, while graduate enrollment is 105 students, including approximately 40 online M.S. students
- A teaching initiative is underway to better quantify faculty teaching effort and workload.

Purdue Horticulture and Landscape Architecture:

- We had 1 faculty retirement (Ray Bressan) and hired 1 lecturer starting in the fall of 26.
- We filled an open container farm manager position (Hydroponic Research Operations Administrator).
- Dr. Wenjing Guan was promoted to Clinical Full Professor.
- We have 25 faculty in the department (clinical + tenure track). We have no current faculty openings and are looking for potential “Moveable Dream Hires” per a university recruitment strategy.
- Our undergraduate enrollment was down in FY25 due to some university caps, but it was back up in FY26. As of spring 26 we had 204 students in our department (50 Horticulture, 23 Sustainable Food & Farm Systems, 35 Turf Management and Science, 96 in Landscape Architecture).
- Our graduate enrollment is at 23.
- We secured funds to construct a Turfgrass Operations and Maintenance building to enhance our research capacity.
- We are currently undergoing a Priva technology upgrade in our Plant Growth Facility (Greenhouses).
- As with all other departments, we are continuing to look for opportunities to grow our students, funding, and impact.

Oregon State University Department of Horticulture

- Enrollment remains flat when compared to last year. Currently assessing ways to boost enrollment.
- BS Horticulture with 7 options (Major and Minor) 283 undergraduate students
 - Ecological Management of Turf, Landscape, and Urban Horticulture (Corvallis)
 - General Horticulture (Online)
 - Horticultural Research (Corvallis)
 - Plant Breeding, Genetics and Genomics (Online and Corvallis)
 - Sustainable Horticultural Production
 - Therapeutic Horticulture (Online)
 - Viticulture and Enology (Corvallis) Entomology Minor
- Graduate Degree- MS and PhD with 2 options, 45 graduate students
 - Plant Breeding and Genetics
 - Entomology
- PACE (Professional and Continuing Education)- Delivered 45 courses; Note: 2/3 of our students are registered online.
- Faculty hires in FY25-26: Turfgrass Management (Assistant Professor); Vegetable Breeding and Genetics (Assistant Professor); Viticulture and Enology (Instructor); Urban Horticulture

(Sr. Instructor/Program Coordinator); Entomology (Instructor/Program Coordinator)

- OSU Horticulture remains strong with respect to finances. Our budget was cut 6.5% in AY 25-26, but we remain strong and with no deficits thanks to the support from donors and industry partners. Revenue from ongoing PACE (Professional and Continuing Education) courses funneled additional funding support to PIs and for use for departmental operations.

South Dakota State University

- The Department of Agronomy, Horticulture and Plant Sciences at South Dakota State University has recently hired four new faculty members in the areas of Controlled Environmental Horticulture, Integrated Pest Management, Weed Ecology, and Entomology with specialization in Beneficial Insects and Pollinators. We seek to hire an Instructor in Horticulture with a focus on Local Foods and to manage our Local Foods Education Center, a Nematologist/Epidemiologist, and an Extension Horticulturalist in Ornamental and/or Turf Science.
- Undergraduate numbers in Horticulture have dwindled in recent years, as such we are working on articulation agreements with regional community colleges and tech schools as well as a two plus two program with Southeast Area Tech in Sioux Falls, SD.
- We have strong graduate student enrollment and have increased the number of PhD students in the program. We currently have 70 graduate students split equally between the MS and PhD programs in Plant Sciences.
- SDSU welcomed Karen Sanguinet at the Klingbeil Endowed Department Head of Agronomy, Horticulture and Plant Science in July 2025.
- Future plans include integration of AI in the classroom and increasing visibility of our programs regionally and nationally.

Texas A&M University

- Department of Horticultural Sciences has recently hired tenure track faculty in plant breeding, plant physiology, secondary metabolism, ornamental horticulture, and pecan research. Current searches focus on an Academic Professional Track faculty member supporting floral design, plant-human interactions, and curriculum development, as well as tenure-track positions in Precision and Intelligent Horticulture and AI-enabled horticultural production systems.
- The department is focusing on integrating plant biology with emerging technologies, including robotics, automation, artificial intelligence, and controlled environment horticulture, while maintaining strong commitments to research, Extension, and teaching. Future priorities include regenerative agriculture, medicinal plants, bioastronautics and space horticulture, and data-driven production systems.
- There has been a nominal increase in undergraduate and graduate student enrollment. An online certificate in Viticulture and Wine Science has been released for the public. Challenges include ensuring that modernization in curriculum and hiring is balanced with meeting the needs of the stakeholders on the farm.



