

HEARTLAND ELDERBERRY COLLABORATIVE (HEARTLAND ECO)

Building the First Elderberry AgriCluster for Regional Resilience

ABSTRACT

Small and mid-sized farms face structural barriers to entering value-added markets, including limited access to processing, cold storage, transportation, and coordinated distribution. The Heartland Elderberry Collaborative (Heartland ECo) AgriCluster Pilot addresses these challenges by organizing elderberry growers and processors in eastern Kansas and western Missouri into a facilitated, place-based collaboration focused on shared infrastructure and market access.

The pilot is active, facilitated through ACRE, and emphasizes collective capacity rather than scaling individual farms. Elderberry was selected for its adaptability to marginal soils, fit with regenerative practices, and growing demand. Key goals include shared processing, storage, and distribution, collective grant capacity, and public education. The long-term goal is a repeatable blueprint for local food-system resilience through shared infrastructure and collaborative governance.

WHAT IS AN AGRICLUSTER?

An AgriCluster is a group of geographically-close farmers and related businesses (like suppliers, researchers, processors, distributors and retailers) working together to boost efficiency, innovation, market access and income, often sharing resources, expertise, and risks for collective benefits to each of their individual businesses.

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Benefits of Elderberry Cultivation

- **Prevents Soil Erosion:** extensive root system and can be planted in areas prone to runoff.
- **Suitable for Marginal Lands:** Elderberry can thrive in marginal soil.
- **Compost:** Elderberry branches and leaves contribute to organic matter in the soil each year.
- **Cover Crop:** Elderberry agroforestry systems or hedgerows suppress weeds.
- **Biodiversity:** Elderberry flowers attract pollinators like bees and butterflies.
- **Provides Food and Habitat:** The berries are a valuable food source for birds and other wildlife, enhancing biodiversity on the farm.
- **Economic Benefits:** Elderberries have a growing market demand for their health benefits and culinary uses, providing farmers with a potential income.
- **Sustainable Farming Practices:** By promoting soil health and natural pest control, elderberry contributes to reducing the need for synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.
- **Carbon Sequestration:** As a perennial plant, elderberry can contribute to carbon sequestration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Small farmers struggle to bring value-added products to market due to limited access to:

- Processing (destemming, juicing, bottling, packaging)
- Cold storage and transportation
- Distribution networks and retail access



2. OBJECTIVES

- Establish a functioning elderberry AgriCluster in eastern Kansas / western Missouri.
- Create shared access to processing, storage, and distribution infrastructure.
- Build collective grant-writing, facilitation, and fundraising capacity.
- Develop educational outreach for public awareness of elderberry and regenerative practices.
- Test whether the model can be repeated for other non-Big Ag crops (e.g., tomato, fruit crops, beans, mushroom).



3. METHODS / PILOT DESIGN

- Conduct facilitated ACRE (AgriCluster Resilience and Expansion) sessions on collaboration and trust-building.
- ACRE facilitation for the AgriCluster is provided by the North American Food Systems and Johnson County Research Extension, with Tara Markley serving as the facilitator.
- Recruit researchers from Kansas State University to observe and support the developing study design.



4. RESULTS (IN PROGRESS)

- Early grant-funding discussions addressing equipment, land, management, and logistical design.
- Recruiting new growers means attracting them with the demand for elderberry for locally stocked grocery store value added products.



5. DISCUSSION

- This pilot addresses a central barrier for small producers: the difficulty of moving beyond raw-crop sales into higher-margin, value-added products. Vertical integration is typically inaccessible to small farms; shared infrastructure changes that.
- Through pooled resources, shared governance, and collaborative infrastructure, the Heartland Elderberry ECo AgriCluster reduces duplication, increases efficiency, strengthens regional supply chains, and provides a repeatable blueprint for local food-system resilience.



6. CONCLUSION

The Heartland Elderberry ECo AgriCluster Pilot potentially can show early evidence that local producers can compete with industrial supply chains when they share processing, storage, and distribution infrastructure.



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