



Season 2 Episode 13 – Operation Grow

September 11, 2023

Speaker 1

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller

Welcome back. It's your host, Olivia Fuller. Today we have on Harli Willis, she is heading up our team program with Dr. Ayanava, our new program called Operation Grow and I'm really excited to learn more about it. It's really helping a lot of the veterans already in the state, and I'm curious to see what all else it is offering and things to look forward to coming up over the summer. Thanks for coming on, Harli. Thanks for having me. So tell me what Operation Grow is. How did it get started? What were you expecting with it and where is it at now?

Harli Willis

Operation Grow is a beginning farmer program designed directly towards military veterans. So how we started was back in 2015, we would go to these trainings and events and just notice that there was a population being a little bit neglected and underserved. So military veterans weren't getting the resources that they needed directly for them. So we kind of made a committee, got a committee together, started talking about how to fix this problem, and then operation came about in that. So last year we revamped it, got it all polished out, and launched it as a military veteran focused beginning farmer program.

Olivia Fuller

And so it's kind of what we offer already as a team. I'm on the Commercial Heart team as a regional extension agent. So it's, it's like what we offer to the farmers through our team programs already, but it's really geared to create like a safe place for them and, and funnel those resources into the veterans in the state.

Harli Willis

Right? Yeah, we're using all the same resources that we've spent years developing in the beginning Pharma program. You've got your, your app, your phone app, the online course, things like that, all those same resources, but we're just creating a more personalized approach and a more centralized approach to the veterans themselves. So it's kind of like taking all of that and building a case by case basis. So we get a lot more handholding, a lot more one-on-one with these veterans.

Olivia Fuller

Okay. So if I'm a, like listening to this podcast as a veteran farmer in the state. And so let me give you two scenarios. One being I'm a brand new farmer, just trying to figure out what the first steps are. What, how do I go about, I, I hear about this, I'm intrigued, what do I do?

Harli Willis

As soon as you hear about it, you can just Google Operation Grow or you can go directly to our website at ww dot operation hyphen grow.com, scroll down. There's a lot of information on that website that you can look at just to get a overall sense of the program. But there's also a short little registration survey at the bottom. So it's a completely free program. There's nothing to lose. You can go through that survey and kind of tell me where you're at in the state, where you're at in your farming journey, what you're trying to specialize in, and then from there I can create a case for you

Olivia Fuller

And then what does it look like From that point, you'll reach out from the survey that I've submitted and, and start providing like technical assistance with figuring out what crop I should grow, what to do with my land. Maybe I've just inherited land. Is is that like the next step?

Harli Willis

I will connect you to your county coordinator and then a regional extension agent based on what you're growing or what you're specializing in. We try to get a meeting together pretty soon so we can just get acquainted and you can kind of learn about all the resources that we have to offer. And then we start you on something called a Beginning farmer checklist. It's a super extensive document mini pages full of everything from how to plant a seed in the ground, all the way to how to market your business and how to create a successful entrepreneurial business for yourself. So we kind of cover all the bases and we meet you where you're

Olivia Fuller

At. Okay, so what if I'm not falling into that beginning veteran farmer category? I've, I'm, I'm experienced, but I still want some resources tailored to me. So that would you, you would tailor it to like a even an experienced farmer? Yeah,

Harli Willis

So we kind of focus a little bit more on that first five years of farming, but we will help you no matter where you are in your journey. So if you just need a few extra resources or if a little bit of advice, you can join the program as well and it will kind of meet you wherever you are. So you don't have to go through all of these years of courses and trainings if you already know what you're doing. If you just need a little extra help, you can give us a call or you can sign up for Operation Grow and we can still give you those resources.

Olivia Fuller

Alabama Ag Credit is a proud sponsor of the Farming Basics podcast. Buying rural property isn't the same as buying in town. If you're in the market to purchase your own piece of paradise or need an operating line for your farm, give our friends at Alabama ag credit a call as the local experts in rural real estate financing. They can help you with everything from homes and lands to tractors and crops because sometimes natural resources need financial resources and while some lenders don't get it, they do learn more by visiting AlabamaAgCredit.com. How would it help me perhaps as a veteran farmer in the, in the long run, like, would I get a certificate for completing the training or is it really just that knowledge that it's providing? Would, would you like maybe connect me then to some of the resources available through the N R C S and like help plug me into, 'cause I know there's so many resources out there for veterans and resources, meaning just beyond the education component that we provide, but financial resources that, you know, Auburn as a academia, we, you know, we don't provide those, but would you connect me then to maybe some of those grants and resources?

Harli Willis

So it's kind of like all of the above? Yeah, where we do, we'll bring you through some trainings. We do our online course, so you'll get a certificate out of that, which helps you in a ton of other things. People recognize that. But we also connect you to a wide variety of different resources, whether that just be veteran based or agricultural based or agricultural veteran based. We try to fill all the gaps that we possibly can with you, whether that just be trainings or the sustainable support aspect, creating a team around you. But anytime we see a need that we can't fill, we have an extensive list of resources and people that we can call. So we can contact N R C S for you. We can contact veteran resources to help you get in contact with them for any type of health benefits. Oh, that's amazing. Yeah, we just try to meet any type of need that there is. If we can't do it, we know someone who can't.

Olivia Fuller

Oh, that's incredible. So I mean, yeah, I guess that would translate to what we offer for non-veteran farmers too. So if anybody's listening that maybe not meeting those requirements, maybe it was your husband that was a veteran maybe you're just in a veteran family. But you can still kind of get those resources no matter what

Harli Willis

This is for veterans and their families. So we have a couple of spouses or sons and daughters who kind of reach out to us looking for the same health help and we give it to everybody. As long as you're related to or have any type of experience with the military, that's great. You can be in this program.

Olivia Fuller

That's great. Any success stories you'd like to share that has have come up over the last, how long has it been now? Like really revamped, pushing

Harli Willis

It hard? We pushed it since last May. So that's kind of when we revamped it and relaunched it. Before that it was maybe one or two people. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So the, we haven't had anybody complete the program because we do ask for people to stay for about five years. So we're nowhere close to that yet. But I guess the biggest success so far is that we're kind of blowing up on the scene right now. We were expecting to have about 30 farmers in the first two years. We've already hit 80 farmers and it hasn't been a full year yet. So that's pretty exciting and we have a lot to give and a lot to offer.

Olivia Fuller

That's great. What are you looking forward to with it going into this next year? So like, everybody's kind of come on at a, these 80 farmers, like what, what's their next course of action for this next year? Are you excited to offer anything different, like as they kind of grow and move through this program?

Harli Willis

Yeah, well, with all the people that have joined, it's kind of had have us come back and reassess what we can do. And we've been focusing on recruitment and getting everybody in and getting everybody settled so far. So now we're going to start offering more trainings and more conferences. We're, we're working on a conference trade show thing right now where we can get all of these veteran farmers together so they can network with each other and kind of create a community up. That's huge. Yeah, it's gonna be really great to just have them lean on one each other, one another, and just be around people who are in the same shoes as you. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So I think that'll be really good. And then it's also a training aspect where we bring out a lot of specialists to focus on what they are, grow, what they're growing, whether that just be vegetables or livestock. We have some people in deer breeding. We're gonna have a lot of different types of trainings at this event. Okay. So

Olivia Fuller

This, okay, so this crosses over from just what I'm so hyper-focused on the commercial hort team. It crosses over into all the other things that extension as a, as a whole

Harli Willis

Offers any type of agricultural sector that you can think of. We are trying our best to cover. I mean extension is huge and we have a lot of resources. So it's not just commercial horticulture. It used to be that's how we started the program, but we have a ton of people in livestock that need that help. So we expanded it to livestock. We've got poultry just forestry, just about anything you could think of

Olivia Fuller

Great that I didn't know that. Well, I learned something new about Operation Grow Today. <Laugh> amazing. Glad y'all have gotten such a huge response to it where you did take it another disciplines and teach them what they need to know from all areas. You know, you don't have to just go into this if you want to grow vegetables only. So that's, that's exciting. Well, thanks for coming on. Is there anything last you would like to say to the veteran farmers if they're thinking about reaching out? So they could find it on the ACEs website? Yeah, you can go to,

Harli Willis

You can go to the ACES website. You can just Google "Operation Grow." We've been on a couple different news sites, so you can find us just about anywhere at this point. You can even find us on Facebook. We're, we're kind of everywhere at this point. But yeah, just come to Operation Grow. There's really nothing to lose. It's completely free and every event that we have or every resource that we connect people with is either free or the lowest cost out there. So it's a good program and we're just trying to help you.

Olivia Fuller

Great. Thanks for coming on and thanks for doing what you do with that program.

Harli Willis

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Speaker 1

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.