

# Operation Grow for Beginning Veteran Farmers 2023 Annual Report

► Offered in partnership with the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries and the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, Operation Grow is a special agricultural training program for military veterans interested in agriculture for health and employment benefits.

The Operation Grow Program (OG) addresses specific issues in Alabama concerning military veterans interested in agriculture. This long-term educational Alabama Cooperative Extension System program is offered in partnership with the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries (ADAI) funded by numerous ADAI Block Grants, Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D) Specialty Crop Grants, Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) United States Department of Agriculture–National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA), Organic Transition, and other funding sources.



**Figure 1.** Agriculture, Forestry, and Natural Resources capacity building and team collaboration.



**Figure 2.** ADAI Commissioner Rick Pate (right), Assistant Commissioner Bob Plaster, and Operation Grow Project Coordinator Harli Willis.

The two major goals of Operation Grow are employment generation and mental health improvement among participating veterans. The first objective—training—provides a three-step farm planning support system for military veterans interested in farming using hands-on, on-farm, and online training (integrated technical, experiential, and social learning for veteran-owned farms). The second objective—networking—connects veterans with other support agencies, institutions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to extend their knowledge base and monitor new needs. The third objective—sustainable support—assists veteran farmers with mentors and communities to increase farming success. Additionally, an equipment loan program is being finalized to help veterans statewide. Operation Grow collaborated with nonprofit organizations statewide across communities and state agencies (ADAI, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs [ADVA], Resource Conservation and Development Council, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Alfa Insurance, and more) in program implementation and evaluation.

## Program Activities

In 2023, Operation Grow conducted major activities to help the program achieve progress toward its set goals and objectives, including digital and print resources, online and in-person training events, and internal and external panel systems. Digital resources were made available to educate, connect, and contribute to the success of beginning veteran farmers. These resources include the Farming Basics mobile app, the Farming Basics online course, Alabama IPM/Sustainable Ag & Operation Grow newsletters, multiple Operation Grow email blasts, horticulture webinars, published news articles from various sources, and an OG Facebook group. Print resources were also developed to promote awareness, guide education, and drive progress. These resources include a comprehensive Beginning Farmer Checklist as a guiding document, new program logo, and promotional materials—promotional cards, banners, tablecloths, pens, key chains, wristbands, sticky notes, tumbler cups, and bags. Many of these were co-created or reviewed by the Operation Grow Advisory Panel and Steering Committee (about 35 peer reviewers) along with ADAI.

Training events were hosted across the state both online and in person. The online events included Facebook Live webinars and Operation Grow Connect (a half-day digital



Figure 3. Kent Davis, ADVA commissioner.



Figure 4. Harli Willis, Operation Grow coordinator, presenting at the OG Boot Camp 2023.



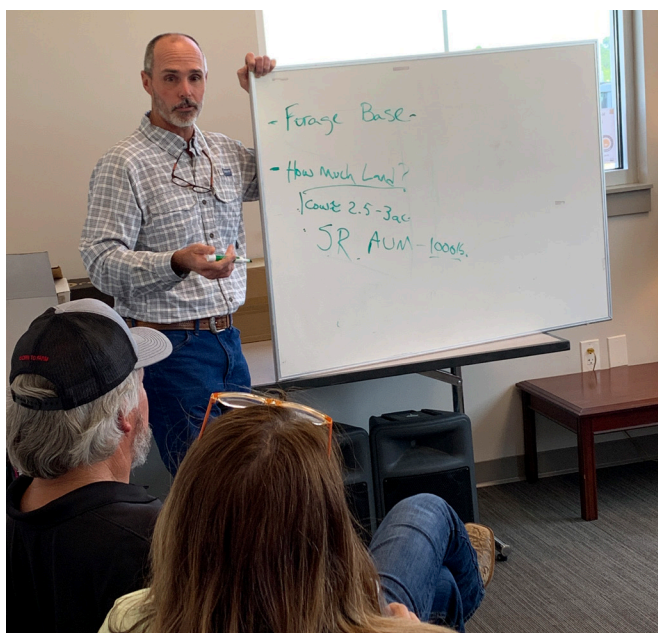
Figure 5. From left, Chip East, regional Extension agent; Kent Davis, ADVA commissioner; Ayanava Majumdar, Extension assistant director for grant and program development; Adam Rabinowitz, Extension specialist; Susie Kim, Operation Grow student worker; and David Lawrence, regional Extension agent.

networking event with multiple topics and speakers) hosted via Zoom. The in-person events included Operation Grow Boot Camp (a full-day educational event with numerous training topics and experts), Operation Grow Workshop Series (a multiple-week series of north Alabama training events on various agricultural topics), and one-on-one consulting with veterans and veteran or agricultural agencies.

Various collaborative efforts were created to develop, maintain, and further the Operation Grow program. Regional Extension agents (REAs), county Extension coordinators (CECs), and county office administrators participated in training events, information dissemination, capacity building, and direct contact with veterans statewide. A steering committee of sixteen Extension personnel consulted on internal program strategies for panel systems and contributed to event planning and implementation. Additionally, a 20-member advisory panel with key stakeholders from ADAI, ADVA, and many NGO collaborators contributed external expert consultation on mental health and resource strategies. Funding agencies such as ADAI, ADVA, RC&D, SARE, and others were vital in continuing the program's efforts.







**Figure 6.** Joshua Elmore, regional Extension agent, at Operation Grow Boot Camp.

## Program Audience

The target audience of Operation Grow vastly benefited from the previously mentioned planned activities. Operation Grow currently has 147 active participants in 50 Alabama counties; program attendees were 78 percent male and 17 percent female. This indicated a two- to three-fold increase in participants seeking assistance within one year. The program's activities resulted in 4,743 direct participants based on collective team efforts. These activities hosted 53.8 percent male and 45.9 percent female participants. The program reach was 69 percent White, 25 percent Black, 3 percent Asian, and 3 percent other in various communities.

The Operation Grow Workshop Series, Operation Grow Boot Camp, and Operation Grow Connect events were very well attended in 2023. The Operation Grow Workshop Series hosted 187 people with a 20 percent veteran attendance. Operation Grow Boot Camp hosted 56 people with 45 percent active-duty military personnel. The group held 203 collective acres and 19 high tunnels. In attendance were 13 percent full-time farmers, 29 percent part-time farmers, 20 percent crop advisers and educators, and 14 percent vendors.

Operation Grow Connect 2023 hosted 19 people via Zoom, with 62 percent veteran attendance. The group held 75 collective acres. Surveys indicated 31 percent of participants had yet to start farming, 23 percent were in their first 10 years of farming, 23 percent were crop advisers or educators, and 23 percent were research or Extension personnel.



The program sent out email blasts using Mailchimp and Extension-approved templates. Subscriptions increased 119 percent within a year. Through five email blasts, there were 319 email opens and 54 clicks to Extension blogs on farming news and events. The program coordinator, Harli Willis, was also featured on news channels, including WSFA-12. During Alabama Extension Week, held October 23 to 28, the Auburn University campus prominently showcased Operation Grow on banners lining busy streets to heighten awareness of the veterans' program. On October 28, Operation Grow was featured on the busy lawn across from Jordan-Hare Stadium where Auburn University was playing Mississippi State University in football. From a large tent, hundreds of pieces of branded literature were distributed to veterans and families visiting the campus. This tremendously increased program visibility.

## Program Outcomes

Beyond the target audience, the broader public also benefited from the program's planned activities. The Operation Grow program coordinator has talked to nearly all registered participants by phone and visited 30 locations to meet veterans directly. With this effort, the program has connected the veterans to county



Extension personnel and educational resources and encouraged veterans to start using the Beginning Farmer Checklist for agricultural training and much more. The program's planned activities provided full-encompassing education about best agricultural practices, networking opportunities, and systematic support for veterans without bias.

The major annual in-person event, Operation Grow Boot Camp, reported a usefulness rating of 95 percent for the training topics that included veteran resources, large livestock, business planning, grant and loan programs, food and pesticide safety, small livestock, vegetable production, and soil health. Participants reported an 82 percent adequate time to network with agricultural and veteran agencies. Major challenges reported were 30 percent labor, 30 percent business skills, 21 percent capital, 11 percent land, and 10 percent equipment; all of which were discussed throughout the training day.

Respondents rated Operation Grow Connect as 67 percent excellent and 33 percent very good with a 100 percent recommendation to other friends and colleagues. The adoption rate for information was 100 percent through a carefully co-created agenda. Some major veteran challenges discussed included 15 percent time, capital, and land, with 8 percent labor, health, and access to information. These challenges were discussed during networking while experts offered consultations. Apart from training and networking events, the main contributor to program participants' beneficial success was the Beginning Farmer Checklist. This 5-year-plan offers a detailed guide to check off the boxes of a successful farm journey. The intricacies of the list were carefully consulted and guided with the participation of CECs

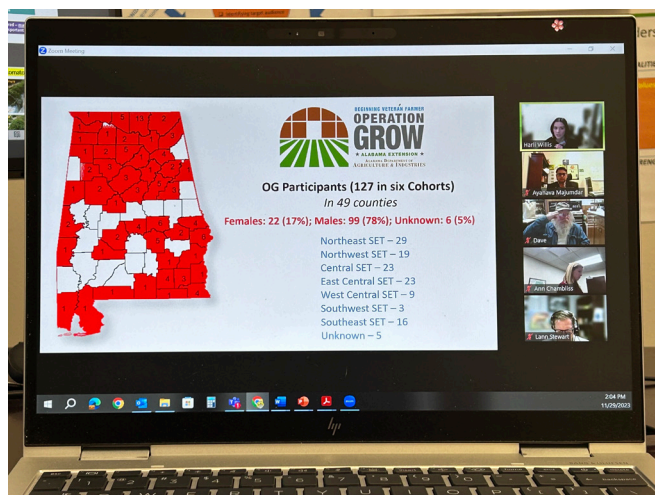


Figure 7. The Operation Grow Connect virtual networking event.

and REAs. This was a major role of the support system created around each Operation Grow participant. Other parties in these support system mini groups are NGOs and mentor farmers in their areas. Throughout the year 2023, registration for the program doubled.

## Program Outreach

Articles were published on the Alabama Extension website ([www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)) and other materials were produced to promote Operation Grow and educate the veteran beginning farmer population in Alabama.

- "Where to Start: A Basic Program Resource Guide for Beginning Farmers"
- Farming Basics, Season 2, Episode 13, "Operation Grow"
- "Military Veterans in Agriculture Find Support Through Operation Grow"
- "Operation Grow for Military Veterans"
- Operation Grow Marketing Video (Program Overview): 29-second commercial for Extension TV
- YouTube Grower Testimonial: Joe Brugger/Upstream Farms
- WSFA 12 News: "Operation Grow Helps Military Veterans Transition into Farming"



**Harli Willis**, *Operation Grow Program Coordinator*, and **Ayanava Majumdar**, *Extension Assistant Director for Grant and Program Development*, both with Auburn University

**For more information**, contact your county Extension office. Visit [www.aces.edu/directory](http://www.aces.edu/directory).

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