

FINCA: Families Integrating Nature, Conservation and Agriculture

What is a Finca?

A “*finca*” is a small, sustainable farm in El Salvador and other Latin American countries where native plants, fruits, flowers, vegetables and animals are grown for food and income. In Latin America, *fincas* have endured for centuries as a traditional way of life. In Missouri FINCA refers to the project Families Integrating Nature, Conservation and Agriculture funded by NIFA.



An example of a native edible plant used in a finca is Wild Plum. Used for nesting by many songbirds. Food for quail, birds, and small mammals.

Background

- Today, small sustainable farms are becoming more common in the United States.
- In fincas in Latin America, there is usually one main cash crop like coffee, cacao or fruits growing together with other agricultural crops like vegetables.
- The Lincoln University Cooperative Extension (LUCE) Native Plants Program (NPP) has developed the FINCA model (Families Integrating Nature, Conservation and Agriculture) with funding from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).
- The main goal of this project is to replicate this small, diversified farm concept. This will transform small, non-productive land in Missouri’s rural and urban areas into useful land. It will also help families learn to integrate nature, conservation and farming.
- The NPP has set up two demonstration fincas. One is located in Jefferson City, Missouri, on the LU campus. The other is on private land in the Missouri Bootheel.
- Experimental plots have been created at Lincoln University’s George Washington Carver Farm and Alan T. Busby Farm in Jefferson City. Here, native plants are evaluated for their growth and survival. These plots are an example for farmers and others to grow native plants as alternative crops.

Objectives

The FINCA program has two objectives. The first is to adapt and apply the FINCA model in Missouri. The second is to assess 20 or more Missouri native plants. They will be included in *fincas* as specialty crops for food and value-added products.



Blue sage is a flowering native plant that can be grown in a finca.

Methodology

Objective 1 has been achieved by establishing one finca at LU campus and one in the Bootheel (Southeast) region in Haywood City, Missouri. For Objective 2, on-going data collection is being done since 2013 and will continue through 2020.

All species are being tested to identify people’s preferences. Food samples prepared with native edible plants are offered during NPP or other type of events. Recipes are prepared at the LUCE Commercial Kitchen and also offered at the LUCE Farmers’ Market. Nutritional value of some species is under research and is already available for others like persimmon fruits.

Preliminary pollinator and bird surveys are being conducted in Jefferson City and the Bootheel. Local schools, youth groups, communities, volunteers and representatives of local agencies are collaborating on this project.



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Outreach and Education

Field days, seminars and workshops are offered in Jefferson City and the Bootheel to train volunteers. They learn how to create and maintain fincas in urban and rural areas. Events and training are open to anyone. Participants are trained to identify native fruit trees, shrubs, vines and herbaceous (non-woody) plants and how they can be consumed as food and used to prepare value-added products. These include

dyes, fiber, herbals, cut flowers and/or craft materials grown in environmentally friendly and sustainable ways. International experts from El Salvador and local experts help the NPP to train Extension Specialists, farmers, students and others to create and manage fincas. LU students and others have increased their knowledge about native edible plants through fincas and the FINCA model. ■

Sample design of a 1-acre finca farm

1. Woody edibles: shrubs, trees, vines and brambles. 2. Conventional vegetable gardens. 3. Permanent gardens: native herbs and berries. 4. Prairie vegetation and rain garden for native pollinators. 5. Living fences, windbreaks or other conservation practices. 6. Gathering area: shed, high tunnel, sale stand, compost bins, cold frames and/or picnic tables.

