

Wednesday May 27th, 2026

Pre-Conference Leadership Workgroup Sessions- 101 Agriculture and Natural Resources Building, UTIA Campus (2431 Joe Johnson Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996)

1:30-4:30 Leveraging Leadership Pre-Conference

The pre-conference afternoon session will be focused on supporting the current and future leaders within our local Extension Master Gardener groups. This pre-conference session is the first in-person meeting of a brand-new statewide Leadership team within our Extension Master Gardener program and is open to those in their 1st year or 30th. All current Extension Master Gardener volunteers are welcome to be a part of this team, whether current leaders or volunteers interested in building new skills and being a part of a new collaboration. Each volunteer will be asked to select a workgroup to be their area of focus. The three workgroups will be: 1) Trialing focused on engaging with Extension faculty to take part in vegetable, fruit, turf and ornamental trials and the use of trial information in local outreach, 2) Education – focused on supporting the training and resources of volunteers teaching in their local communities, 3) Diagnostics- supporting helpdesks and all the many ways EMGs answer plant questions.

The preconference afternoon will consist of an overview session to introduce everyone to the goals and plans for the Leveraging Leadership workgroups. Then, each of the four groups will break out for a fun and engaging afternoon of teaching and interactive content to engage and equip volunteers in the content and skills of each of the teams.

- Trial Workgroup Topics: The need for Tennessee trialing and the value of EMG engagement; Research and the Extension Master Gardener; Trial plans for 2026- what are we growing and what are we evaluating; Data collection plans for 2026 and live plant distribution; Key needs for future trialing; Current resources developed from previous efforts (led by Natalie, Becky, Caitlin and Katie)
- Education Workgroup Topics: Aligning our educational efforts with our Extension mission; The Educator Mindset; Developing learning outcomes; Evaluation of programs- concept and technology/tools; Brainstorming needs for the educator toolkit; Incorporating education into existing projects (led by Anna, Gregg, Amy, Syd, Cat, Kelly, Anna P)
- Diagnostics Workgroup Topics: Realities of diagnostics and helpdesks in the county office and EMG program; Starting new diagnostics efforts locally, Brainstorming needs for the diagnostics toolkit; Diagnostics and troubleshooting walk and talk in the UT Gardens (led by Celeste, Taylor, Seth, Madison, Baileigh)
- 2025 and 2026 Intern Intensive- if you are one of our newest Extension Master Gardeners, we are so glad you are joining in on the leadership pre-conference and want to welcome you to a special session for you as future leaders that focuses on our organization and how you can get involved as well as helping you connect with others. (Emily, Melody, Haley, Shelia, Ginny)

Conference Kickoff – UT Gardens Friendship Pavilion

5:00-6:30 Solid Foundations- **Our Extension Master Gardener Program and the Land-Grant Legacy**

Our 2026 conference kickoff will begin with all the things we love best- plants, people, and food. We'll begin with hors d'oeuvres around 5:00 with time to mingle and visit folks from around the state. Then, we'll welcome everyone to the UTIA campus and officially kick off our 2026 state conference with special guest Dr. Carver. We'll celebrate great people and programs and get you connecting with new and old friends from around Tennessee.

5:00-5:30 Mingle and food

5:45 Welcome and Greetings

6:00 "Building our local outreach on the strength of the land-grant foundation"- Dr. Justin Rhinehart Dean of UT Extension

Thursday, May 28th, 2026- 101 Agriculture and Natural Resources Building, UTIA Campus
(2431 Joe Johnson Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996)

8:15-8:45 AM *Registration and Morning Welcome- 101 ANR Building*

Registration will be open for folks arriving for the first time. We'll gather in ANR 101B so attendees can connect with the tour leads and get all the information they need to be ready for their morning tour adventures. All tour groups will depart from the main conference area at 8:45. Some tours will be walking, some will have UT vans and some will include carpooling. Attendees will select a tour during registration, and more details will be sent out for individual tours. Tours are planned, led, and hosted by UTIA faculty, Extension agents and local horticulture partners with the focus being on connecting EMGs with the vital research foundation of our horticulture outreach!

9:00-11:30 AM *Tour 1- UT Gardens Knoxville with a focus on the role of research – led by Whitney and the UT Gardens team with Celeste as tour facilitator and the team of Syd, Emily, Katie*

Whether your 1st or your 50th visit to the UT Gardens Knoxville, we know this morning will provide new information and perspective on all that the Gardens does for horticulture in Tennessee as we focus on research and stewardship activities. The morning will begin with James, Whitney and the Gardens team sharing some of the history of the Gardens as well as ongoing and new efforts to focus on stewardship from water conversation to autonomous electric mowers. Then, you'll divide into smaller groups for a morning of deep dives into applied research efforts at the Gardens including: 1) Kitchen garden, 2) Pollinator research, 3) Ornamental and rose trials, 4) Children's garden and nature play, 5) Constructed wetlands and water stewardship. The morning will close with the whole group coming back together for a discussion of the ways we as volunteers can use and share information with our consumer audiences from UT Gardens efforts.

(Limit 50) <https://utgardens.tennessee.edu/>

9:00-11:30 AM *Tour 2- Veggies, Flowers, and Bees at the UT Organic Crops Unit Farm- led by Drs. Bumgarner and Tsuruda along with Caitlin, Haley and the OCU team*

We'll travel about 10 minutes south of campus to our UT research farm that houses research on vegetables, cut flowers, apiculture, high tunnels, agroforestry and more. We'll start with an overview, history, and tour of the farm led by Samantha from the AgResearch team. Then, we'll spend the rest of our tour on interactive experiences that focus on the realities of applied specialty crop research. Our vegetable and flower research tours will focus on the soil, sweat and sweet and tasty data collection as well as how we use these results for grower and gardener benefit. The apiculture research section of the morning will have you in a real bee suit and taking part in apiculture research methods such as paint-marking bees and learning how pollen traps and bee sampling works. (Limit 25- now full) <https://easttn.tennessee.edu/organic-crops-unit-location/>

9:00-11:30 AM *Tour 3- Turfgrass, FIFA, homegrown hops and more at the UT Plant Sciences Research Farm – led by Dr. Bowling and Anna along with the Richmond and Hayter labs and the UT turfgrass team*

Join us for a behind-the-scenes look at Tennessee specialty crops, from turfgrass and groundcovers and emerging crops like hemp, hops, and tobacco, and learn how UT researchers support growers through disease management, variety evaluation, and practical Extension programs. You will hear how environmental conditions, insects, and pathogens interact to influence plant health, along with ongoing efforts to improve crop efficiency, evaluate new production systems, and support growers with real-world challenges. On the turfgrass side, we will explore variety trials for common lawn grasses in Tennessee, highlight alternative groundcover research for lower-input landscapes, and make a quick stop at active weed science trials. The

tour will also include a visit to the FIFA “lighthouse” building, where research supporting the 2026 World Cup has taken place, offering a unique look at how turfgrass science connects to global-scale events.

(Limit 30)

9:00-11:30 AM Tour 4- Streams, Wetlands, and Stewardship – led by Dr. Ludwig

Here in Tennessee we have some amazing water resources that also provide many challenges and opportunities for stewarding and protecting these amazing rivers and streams as our state grows and changes. Join Dr. Andrea Ludwig for a tour of all things water and stewardship happening here at UT. She will take the group on a morning ramble around campus to learn about planning, design and management of the constructed wetland in the UT Gardens, stream protection and restoration practices in nearby Third Creek and introduce everyone to the floating wetlands designed and built by UT students in the sustainable landscape design program. This tour will focus on practices utilized here in Knoxville but will also connect with your outreach as a volunteer as Andrea will also share how these tools and practices can be a part of local EMG volunteer outreach through the Smart Yards, Smart Communities and stream stewards programs she leads! Be prepared to leave prepared and excited about protecting the Tennessee waterways near you!

(Limit 25)

9:00-11:30 AM Tour 5- IJAMs Nature Center Pollinators and Wildlife Education Tour – led by Melody Rose with Cat, Amy, Seth and the IJAMs team

Join us for a guided experience at Ijams Nature Center, one of the country’s most visited nature centers. The program will highlight the ecological richness of our site and the broader East Tennessee region, while sharing the unique story of our 320 acres. Once a family bird sanctuary bordering an industrial site, it has transformed into a community gathering space designed for conservation.

Participants will have the opportunity to dipnet for amphibians and macroinvertebrates in the ponds and streams near the Ijams family Homesite to gain a closer look at the ecosystems that make this site so unique. Along the way, we’ll highlight native flora and fauna restoration and the ongoing partnerships that have made such work possible. This relaxed program follows the Will Skelton Greenway and Serendipity Trail Loop. Program participants will journey from the Visitor Center to the historic Ijams family Homesite, where the family’s stewardship efforts laid the foundation for our conservation work today.

Trail Details: *Walking shoes and comfortable clothing are highly recommended for this field trip.*

- Will Skelton Greenway is surfaced with asphalt and is approximately 8 feet wide.
- The Serendipity Loop Trail is surfaced with hard packed gravel and is approximately 4 feet wide.
- Both trails have an estimated average grade of 5% or less.

(Limit 25)

9:00-11:30 AM Tour 6- Knoxville Smokies Stadium Tour- Turfgrass and Beyond – led by Dr. Samples, Gregg, Justin and the UT Turf Team with Smokies colleagues

Go behind the scenes at the new Knoxville Smokies Stadium to explore how turfgrass is managed in a high-performance, multi-use sports environment. This tour will highlight practical strategies for maintaining safe, playable surfaces under the demands of frequent games and diverse field use. Participants will hear directly from the on-site grounds crew about day-to-day operations, challenges, and decision-making, alongside insights from UT turfgrass researchers and Extension specialists. Together, these perspectives provide a well-rounded look at how science and practice come together to support high-quality sports fields.

(Limit 20)

11:30-1:00 **Lunch back at ANR Building** on UTIA Campus- Return from your morning tour to campus for a Taziki's lunch and some relaxing time to reconnect and visit with friends old and new before our afternoon sessions.

1:00-2:00 PM **Afternoon General Session**

1:00-1:30 PM **Tennessee Extension Welcomes**

UT Institute of Agriculture VP/VC Dr. Keith Carver

Dave Close, UTIA Volunteerism Specialist, will join us to share about volunteerism across UTIA and how we are all a part of cultivating a positive volunteer culture

1:30-2:00 PM **Tennessee Extension Master Gardener Search for Excellence Awards**

Afternoon Breakout Sessions

2:15-3:30 PM Breakout #1

1) ***Graphic design 101: Designing for accessibility and aesthetics***- Whether it's flyers or social media graphics promoting a plant sale or a PowerPoint presentation for a gardening talk, the colors, fonts, and layout you use matter! In this presentation, Anna Duncan and team will explain the basics of graphic design so that you can confidently create eye-catching materials that accurately convey your message and meet federal accessibility standards.

2) ***The five Ws of credibility in finding and using content for outreach***- When looking for an answer to a gardening question, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the mass amount of information that is available. To sift through it all and find a reliable, research-based answer, ask yourself a few questions. Who said it? What was said? When was the information published? Where is the information intended to be used? (i.e. is the information suited for your geographical region?) Why does this source believe this is the right answer? (i.e. How did they come to this conclusion? Was research conducted?) In this session, Seth and Katie Whitehouse will work through all of these questions and equip you to spot reliable sources and research-based information!

3) ***Social butterfly training: Using social media to establish a positive online presence***- Likes, followers, engagement, static posts, carousels, and reels—what does it all mean? Join Haley Treadway and friends as they explain it all and teach you to plan and post engaging and educational content to serve and grow your social media following!

4) ***Leadership in our Local EMG Groups- working through conflict for positive outcomes***- Does conflict arise in your local association from time to time? Of course! Conflict is a natural and actually essential element of any organization. Never fear! Join Emily Richards and Melody Rose who will walk and talk you through the steps to navigate conflict via person to person and/or within the organization. Dealing with conflict swiftly eliminates the need for intervention from a higher level, while simultaneously creating trust amongst local association members.

3:45-5:00 PM Breakout #2

1) ***Taking trials to the people: understanding and using applied research in your local EMG projects*** – Where does new garden plant or growing information come from? How does new gardening information make it out of the field trials and into our home gardens? Join Gregg Upchurch along with Dr. Bumgarner and Bowling as we discuss how to develop and then use information that comes from applied research trials in real and practical ways in your local EMG education and outreach. This session will feature teaching as well as small group discussions to help our UT Extension team conduct and share the information you need locally!

2) ***Diagnostics and IPM in the home landscape***- One of the most common areas of outreach is answering questions and helping residents solve issues in their home landscapes. To help you help others, this session focuses on diagnosing issues in your own home landscapes and those of others you engage with in outreach. From asking the right questions to helping stakeholders find resources and great plants for our area, Taylor Reeder and Celeste Scott will equip you to assess common plant problems and help use these skills in your local group outreach!

3) ***Education for adult audiences: What they need and how they learn***- Adults have their own set of rules when it comes to learning! They come to us with their own ideas, assumptions, and prior knowledge. Therefore, we must tailor our instruction to their needs. Join Anna Duncan and friends as they share the key elements of effective adult education! You might even notice some similarities to our Master Gardener program; see if you can spot them!

4) ***Connecting gardens and nutrition- Let's Grow Tennessee community garden teaching curriculum*** – Positive partnerships are the name of the game in our Extension Master Gardener program, and one of our great recent collaborations has been the Let's Grow Tennessee community garden curriculum that connects FCS nutrition teaching with growing food in community gardens. This session will share successes and experiences from the first two years of Let's Grow and equip you to use this new curriculum and learn how to teach some of the key nutrition topics. Session led by Dr. Kristen Johnson from our FCS department and Emily Richards who has led this series with EMGs in her local county.

5:00-6:00 PM Dinner

Food and Fellowship with an Opportunity for Project Sharing Across the State

Grab some dinner and join volunteers from around the state for some valuable and low-key visiting time to share about projects and outreach. All volunteer attendees are invited to bring a display or materials from local programs or outreach to share. We'll have a buffet dinner and time and space to visit with everyone while the traffic clears!

Friday, May 29th, 2026- 101 Agriculture and Natural Resources Building, UTIA Campus (2431 Joe Johnson Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996)

Coffee and donuts will be provided in each of the regional planning meetings rooms at the conference location.

8:30-9:45 AM *Regional Visits and 2027 EMG Regional Tour Planning*

These regional meetings will provide the opportunity for volunteers and agents from the east, central, and west regions of Tennessee Extension to learn about events happening in 2026, connect and share, along with focused time to plan 2027 regional tours.

10:00-11:45 AM Hands-On, In-Depth Morning Workshops

1) ***Building insect collections for education, fun, and supporting local diagnostics*** – Expand your knowledge of insects for fun and to support your local pest problem solving and sleuthing with a hands-on session all about insects. You'll learn about identification of both pests (including invasive species) and beneficial insects and learn techniques for preserving and displaying insects in a way that can be put into action in local horticulture outreach. This session will be led by Drs. Jerome Grant and Matthew Longmire from Entomology and Plant Pathology and our own Seth Whitehouse who leads the Anderson County Extension and EMG programs (Limit 20)

2) ***Friendly fungi: Exploring beneficial fungi and plant relationships***- Often we think of fungi as mainly a foe in our gardens and landscapes, but the wide world of soil organisms has many friendly fungi as well! Join Plant Sciences professor, Dr. David Butler, who studies applied soil-plant-fungal interactions in horticultural cropping systems and Blount County horticulture agent and EMG coordinator, Caitlin Dalton, for an education and hands-on experience. Together, we will dive into the fascinating world of plant-microbe interactions! (Limit 20- now full)

3) ***Native plant propagation and use in the landscape*** – Plant propagation is one of the most fun areas of gardening for many, and the nuances and mysteries of native plant propagation can add another intriguing layer to our garden toolkit. Join Celeste Scott, our western region horticulture specialist and Dr. Andrea Ludwig, our favorite plant geek engineer for an interactive session on native plant propagation and use from seeds to plants and across the landscape. (Limit 20- now full)

4) ***Food Preservation with a Focus on Home Canning: Peachy Pepper Jelly***- Enjoy the tasty fruits of your garden through the year with home fruit preservation. Cumberland County FCS agent Crystal Blankenship will lead this demonstration that will focus on jellies and jams that incorporate produce from our own gardens and small orchards. The activity will focus on peaches and peppers jelly with enough for everyone to take home a jar! (Limit 20- now full)

5) ***Home food production in small spaces: From containers to hydroponics*** – Whether you have only a balcony or an 100-acre backyard, small scale food production practices can be a fun and productive way to grow your own food! In this session, we'll work from one of our teaching greenhouses and do hands-on teaching with a range of container and hydroponic vegetable and fruit growing systems. You'll learn about different containers, media, and fertilizers and get to select a container or small hydroponic system to make and take home! This session will be led by the small-scale food team of Natalie, Amy, Haley, and Madison. (Limit 20- now full)

6) **Houseplant and shrub propagation** – Learn about different plant propagation techniques used by gardeners as well as the horticulture industry to multiply tropical houseplants and woody shrubs. Plus, you'll be able to try your hand at a variety of techniques and take home some propagules to grow and try in your own garden or windowsill! This session will be led by Taylor Reeder with Kelly Dozier and Katie Witbeck. (Limit 20)

7) **Backyard fruit walk and talk with peach bud grafting hands-on**- Gear up for summertime in home fruit production with a walk and talk focused on in-season fruit management and discussions of pests, diseases and practical tips. Plus, the hands-on portion of the session will enable you to try your hand at bud grafting on peaches, a summer staple in Tennessee fruit production nurseries. This session will be led by Dr. Annie Vogel, our UT Extension fruit specialist and Gregg Upchurch ANR agent and EMG coordinator from Cumberland County. (Limit 20)

8) **Tennessee grapes and wine- from terroir to tasting**- Whether you are considering your own vines or have been growing grapes for years, you will want to learn about the challenges and opportunities for home grapes and the unique elements of Tennessee grape growing and wines. This session will be led by Dr. Pierre Davadant, our UT viticulturist and Melody Rose, long time wine connoisseur. Join in on a teaching, tasting and terroir (the impact of location of wine characteristics) tour of Tennessee! (Limit 20- now full)

12:00-1:15 Lunch Buffet and Closing Session – From Solid Research Foundations to Solid Relationship Foundations: Our Local EMG Culture in TN Communities

1:30-2:15 **Campus Mini Tours – All will depart from ANR 101B following lunch (we'll dismiss tours together with their guides) and will include only short, easy walks around the UTIA campus or buildings**

1) **ANR Building Green Roof Tour** – (limit 30- now full)

Take a tour of east Tennessee's take on the cedar glades to complete your conference experience here on our UTIA campus. One of the most fun elements of our new Ag and Natural Resources Building is the green roof designed and planted to include a range of native plants as well as teaching and research areas. Haley Treadway, our Hamilton County ANR agent and Master Gardener coordinator as well as UT grad will be your tour guide to our own little 3rd floor glades!

2) **Greenhouse and Controlled Environment Agriculture Tour**- (Limit 30- now full)

Learn about the wide range of controlled environment and greenhouse research that is underway at the University of Tennessee. This tour will visit greenhouses and growth chambers here on our UTIA where faculty and students research lighting, nutrition, pest management, and novel technologies that support agriculture here on Earth and in space!! Your tour will be led by Sam Humphreys, a PhD student in Plant Sciences working in the Controlled Environment Lab.

3) **Urban Tree Walk and Talk** – (limit 30- now full)

One of the most beautiful elements of our UTIA and UT campus are the trees! Join with members of the UT arboriculture team and UT students for a fun walk and talk around the UTIA campus focused on selection and management of campus trees from the stately elders of campus to new and native selections!