

MTBGA & MTGWA 2025 Annual Conference

Speaker Biographies

Austin Buchholtz – MTBGA Marketing

Austin brings 20 years of professional graphic design experience and a lifelong love for Montana berries. He plays a key role in collecting, designing, and sharing information to help MTBGA members market and sell their berries. At the 2025 conference, Austin will report on marketing efforts to date, introduce new member-accessible marketing assets, and outline MTBGA's 2025 marketing goals. Additionally, attendees will collaborate on identifying top selling points for various berries to enhance sales materials and the MTBGA website.

Bob Thaden – Founder, Owner, and Winemaker, Tongue River Winery, Miles City, MT

A pioneer in Montana fruit growing and winemaking, Bob—along with his wife Marilyn—founded Tongue River Winery. He will discuss fruit wine production and strategies for strengthening local fruit supplies.

Dr. Clain Jones – MSU Extension Soil Fertility Specialist

Dr. Jones will provide insights on monitoring and maintaining soil nutrition for grapes and other perennial fruit crops, ensuring optimal growth and production.

Dominic Rivard – Winemaker, Consultant, & Author

An expert in fruit wines, Dominic is a winemaker and consultant from Nova Scotia, Canada. He is the author of *The Ultimate Fruit Winemaker's Guidebook* and will share insights on fruit wine production. More information is available at dailyfruitwine.com.

Dr. Harlene Hatterman-Valenti – Horticulture Professor, North Dakota State University

Dr. Hatterman-Valenti will present on cold-hardy grape varieties and other resilient fruit crops suited for northern climates.

Jenny Thull – Vineyard Manager, University of Minnesota

Jenny oversees vineyard operations at the University of Minnesota and will contribute insights on vineyard management practices.

Dr. Jesse King – University of Montana, Department of Management and Marketing

Dr. King will discuss the fundamentals of marketing local fruit and wine, helping attendees understand consumer behavior and how to leverage it for business success.

John Thull – Researcher, University of Minnesota

With nearly 20 years of experience in grape breeding and vineyard management, John will share his expertise on cultivating grapes in northern climates.

Speaker biographies continued...

Mary Ellis – Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program Director, Missoula Farm Connect

Mary will share key strategies for successfully managing a farm business, covering essential business principles for farmers and growers.

Melissa Allred - Owner, Aspen Grove Farm, Corvallis, MT

Melissa started Aspen Grove in 2019, but has over 20 years experience as both a fruit and vegetable farmer in the Bitterroot valley. Her farm is home to many different types of berries and a young fruit orchard. Aspen Grove produces a line of jams, syrups, and barbecue sauces made from their farm-grown berries and sells fresh and frozen berries at several local farmer's markets. It also operates a U-Pick at the farm during the growing season. Melissa loves to have her hands in the soil, growing and nurturing her beautiful berries. Introducing people to the flavors of freshly grown berries is her life's passion.

Nicole Erickson - MTGWA Vineyard Outreach Associate, Whitefish, MT

As the former owner of Unleashed Winery in Whitefish, Nicole developed an intimate understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing Montana winemakers. Her lifelong enthusiasm for wine and business development has fueled her commitment to strengthening the state's viticulture and viniculture community. She is honored to contribute to MTGWA's mission while helping build a professional and recognizable organization that uplifts and supports Montana's vineyards and wineries.

Patty & Fred Omodt – Owners/Farmers, Shingle Mill Blueberry Farm, Sandpoint, ID

Patty and Fred will share their experiences and challenges in berry farming, offering valuable lessons from their journey as blueberry growers.

Sandy Sands - Agriculture Consultant

Sandy Sands has worked since 2018 to assist Montana agricultural employers to help meet their workforce needs through the H-2A Visa Program. Nearly 600 Montana employers have utilized temporary help through this federal program to help contribute to the food production and economy of Montana citizens. He is an avid cribbage player and enjoys traveling and playing competitively around the US and abroad, as well as hosting and directing tournaments in Montana. He lives in Helena, MT with his French Bulldog, Baxter.

Steffen Mirsky – Emerging Crops Program, University of Wisconsin

Steffen will provide updates on Midwest berry research, focusing on the latest developments in emerging fruit crops.

Dr. Zach Miller – Director, MSU-Western Agricultural Research Center

Dr. Miller will present recent research on berries, grapes, and other fruit crops conducted at Montana State University, providing updates on advancements in the field.