

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

September 2026



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Peoria Friendship House garden grows more than food

The Friendship House Community Garden in Peoria is cultivating more than vegetables. Through a partnership with University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners, students are gaining confidence, leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of food systems through year-round horticulture education.

Master Gardeners Kendra Belk and Jaime Dooley lead the program, which engages students in a "seed to seed" learning experience that begins during the winter months and continues through planting, harvesting, and seed saving. Students learn about garden planning, seed selection, soil health, plant life cycles, and food production while gaining hands-on experience throughout the growing season.

"The biggest impact is when students realize they are capable of creating and caring for something from beginning to end," said Belk. "The garden has become much more than a place to grow vegetables. It has become a classroom where students build confidence, practice patience, solve problems, and develop a sense of ownership."

Students learn practical gardening skills such as seed starting, transplanting, watering, pruning, harvesting, and seed saving. Along the way, they develop responsibility, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and perseverance.

Harvest season provides students with a tangible reward for months of effort. Many take produce home to share with their families, while the excess supports Friendship House's food pantry. Through these experiences, students begin to understand how growing food can benefit both their households and their community.

The program's impact is evident in students like Marcus, who shared that gardening at Friendship House reminded him of working alongside his grandmother. Continuing a gardening tradition she taught him has helped Marcus grow into a leader in the garden while strengthening a connection to an important family memory.

As students gain knowledge and experience, many begin taking initiative by identifying weeds, recognizing when plants need water, and helping younger participants learn new skills. The garden creates opportunities for students to lead while contributing to its success.

Community support has been key to the garden's growth. Partnerships among Friendship House staff, Illinois Extension, Master Gardeners, volunteers, and local organizations have expanded educational opportunities and strengthened the program. This year, a Know More, Grow More Grant funded the installation of an irrigation system.

The project's success was recently recognized with the 2026 Illinois Extension Master Gardener Teamwork Award.

"Our hope is that every student leaves the program knowing they have the ability to grow food, care for the environment, and make a positive impact in their community," Belk said.



Master Gardeners Kendra Belk and Jaime Dooley (center) provide year-round horticulture education that helps Friendship House students build confidence, leadership skills, and an understanding of food systems from seed to harvest.

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