



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

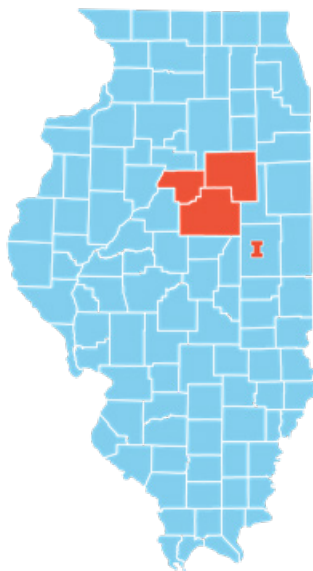


Serving Livingston, McLean, and Woodford Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





*Katie Buckley
County Director*



A note from the county director

To our Extension supporters,

As we embark on a new year, I want to take a moment to reflect on the significant impact we have made together and share our plan for the future.

Over the past year, Illinois Extension has made remarkable strides in enhancing the quality of life for residents in Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties. Our programs have reached thousands of individuals, providing valuable resources and education in areas such as agriculture and natural resources, youth development, and family and consumer science. Through 4-H programs, we have empowered young people to develop leadership skills, engage in community service, and explore career opportunities. Our nutrition and wellness initiatives have promoted healthier lifestyles, reducing the incidence of chronic diseases in our community.

Looking ahead, we are excited to build on our successes and address emerging challenges.

We aim to increase our reach by leveraging digital platforms and forming new partnerships with community organizations. Providing continuous improvement of our programs through feedback and evidence-based practices will ensure we meet the evolving needs of our community. We will foster stronger relationships with stakeholders, encouraging active participation and collaboration in our initiatives.

We are grateful for your continued support and partnership. Together, we can create a brighter future for Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties.

Thank you for your commitment to our mission. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities as a whole. To see this report digitally and follow along with our local Extension events calendar, we encourage you to visit go.illinois.edu/LMW.

Katie Buckley
County Director

Cover photo: A loaf of sourdough bread prepared by local Educators Nick Frillman and Jenna Smith for their popular Sourdough Bread 101 webinar series.

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension's programs, resources, knowledge, and dedicated staff that are responsive to eight strategic priorities:



Community



Economy



Environment



Food and Agriculture



Health



Partnerships



Technology and Discovery



Workforce Excellence

2024 Engagement

Extension leaders, staff, and stakeholders define priorities that create meaningful, mission-centered outcomes throughout the state:

730

Communities Served

805K+

Program Attendees

9.7M+

Webpage Views

22.4M+

Social Media Impressions

2.5M+

YouTube Impressions

547

Educational Sessions/Week
(28K+ Annually)

90

Online Courses Accessed by
12K+ People

12,484

Local Government Education Webinar Reach

1,840

4-H Clubs

67,917

Fair Exhibits

20,339

Members

261,012

4-H Experiences

Partnerships

5,563

Program Volunteers

266

Community Gardens

2,922

School and Community Partners

\$15,735,213

Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$514,316

Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated

\$4.7M+

External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners



Collaboration leads to sourdough success

Since the pandemic, baking has made a big rebound as a home-based hobby, with sourdough bread baking at the forefront of that trend. However, there are many social media influencers and websites that offer beginner-level tips, tutorial videos, and quick summaries about sourdough. It can be overwhelming for a beginner baker to find a reliable source of information.

In response to this need, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Jenna Smith and Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Nick Frillman began developing a class on the basics of making sourdough bread, including how to make a starter and how to bake a loaf.

After several months of recipe testing, presentation development, and fine-tuning, Smith and Frillman offered their first Sourdough Bread 101 class to 18 individuals in March. After making a few improvements, the class was offered in June to 25 individuals. Participants learned about the history and science of sourdough fermentation, made their own sourdough starter with regionally grown and stoneground grains, and took home directions for how to use their starters — once mature — to bake their very first sourdough bread loaf.

In following up with class attendees, Smith and Frillman were able to troubleshoot issues and provide encouragement.

Thank you so much for...providing these additional hints and tips. I was getting a little down about my starter success and have been intimidated to start using it, but I'm re-inspired to keep going.

Class Participant

Thank you for taking the time to sit down with me on the phone and listen to me. I really wanted to get into sourdough baking for the long haul. I just love the sourdough taste! I'm excited to get back in the kitchen and try again.

Class Participant

Ninety percent of attendees who took the post-class survey reported a gain in knowledge, and 97% planned to use and share the resources. In addition, both classes had long waitlists of interested people. Building on this success, Smith and Frillman adapted the class into a two-part webinar series that reached over 400 people across the state.

An increase in sourdough baking trends in the tri-county area has led to an increased demand for locally or regionally grown, value-added organic grains to be grown, milled, and sold in small Illinois towns. Demand for artisan grain products for sourdough and other baked goods translates to increased economic vitality for small farmers and the small family businesses they shop at in Illinois towns.

Spanish language Certified Food Protection Manager class supports local entrepreneurs

Illinois food establishments and cottage food operators are required to have at least one certified food protection manager on duty during all hours of operation. To help food service workers meet this requirement, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Jenna Smith offered the Certified Food Protection Manager course eight times in 2024, totaling 117 participants. Ninety-one percent of participants passed the exam and received their certificates.

However, many English as a second language participants struggle to pass the exam when the course, materials, and exam are not in their preferred language. Therefore, Smith and an Illinois Extension interpreter offered the class at Chestnut Family Health Center with the materials, exam, and instruction in Spanish. All seven participants passed their exam, which was a significant success. A celebration with food and networking took place a couple of months after the course. One mother/daughter duo reported that the certificate is the first step in getting closer to their dream of opening their own restaurant. The mother previously taught herself how to read, and she said she was always very nervous to take the test, knowing she is a slow test taker; so, the fact that she passed the test was a huge accomplishment. Her expression of gratitude was immense. Illinois Extension hopes this is the start of many future Spanish CFPM classes in McLean County.





SNAP-Ed made big strides in 2024

SNAP-Ed had a big year in 2024. One of the biggest successes for the team was the ability to start holding classes in Spanish. This gave the team new ways to connect with new partners and increase the number of participants to expand programming. Overall, the SNAP-Ed team taught:



578
Sessions



2,726
Participants

The policy, systems, and environmental work that the SNAP-Ed team accomplished not only expanded through new partnerships but also deepened the relationships with current partners.

One new partner for SNAP-Ed was The Downtown Bloomington Farmers' Market. Once a month, the SNAP-Ed team set up a nutrition lesson and hosted market tours throughout the market season. One team member would conduct the nutrition lesson while the other would host the tours. The farmers' market staff wanted to increase the number of people using their SNAP benefits at the market, which is where the idea of hosting the tours started. For many, one of the biggest barriers to using benefits at a farmers' market is knowing where to start. The tours started at the information booth, where people would tell the market staff how much of their benefits they would like to use and get tokens for that amount. Then, SNAP-Ed staff would walk around the market with the tour and show them which vendors would accept their tokens and what products could be purchased to make it less intimidating to use SNAP benefits at the farmers' market.



Booth at The Downtown Bloomington Farmers' Market



The Tri-County Hunger Walk committee

SNAP-Ed also expanded its reach and partnerships with the 2024 Tri-County Hunger Walk. Throughout Hunger Action Month, the Hunger Walk planning committee increased the number of educational activities offered to the public. The committee hosted a reading of the children's book "Lulu and the Hunger Monster." SNAP-Ed educators provided training to 17 volunteers who read to 36 classes in 24 locations. In total, 508 children attended these classes and learned about hunger, its effects on health, and how they can help others in their community. At the end of Hunger Action Month, the Tri-County Hunger Walk was the culminating activity. The event was a success with:



74
Walkers



1,174.6
Pounds of food

Food was donated to one pantry in each county represented. In Woodford County, Spring Bay Food Pantry received the donations. In 2024, participants donated almost 200 more pounds of food than the 2023 total.



Learn about making healthy food choices
eat-move-save.extension.illinois.edu



Wits Workout series connects older adults and offers intellectual challenges

As the population demographics of older adults continue to climb, local Illinois Extension efforts focus on programs to assist this age group with remaining healthy in mind, body, and spirit. Combining social connection with intellectual challenges is an important way to support brain health in older adults, and Wits Workout is a unique program that seeks to fill this need for community members.

Wits Workout is a peer-reviewed, pilot-tested brain health tool developed to provide programming to older adults in community settings. Based on the research that intellectual challenge and social connectedness are two of several factors that contribute to brain health throughout life, Wits Workout has two main goals — to provide purposeful opportunities for older adults to engage intellectually and to increase their socialization through ongoing group participation.

Illinois Extension partnered with area libraries to bring the Wits Workout program to community members through monthly sessions. Partners in the Wits Workout program included Prairie Creek Library District in Dwight (Livingston County), Carlock Library (McLean County), and Eureka Public Library (Woodford County). Participants were led through interactive activities designed to exercise the brain to maintain and enhance cognitive function and memory.

While Wits Workout has slowly been rolled out in the three counties over the summer and fall, interest in the program is growing, as is attendance. Over the course of a few months, staff have seen steady growth in the number of participants as well

as an increase in the volume of laughter. The positive feedback from participants highlights the program's impact—not just on cognitive function but also on social connection, which is so vital for emotional health. It's heartwarming to hear how participants are not only enjoying the activities but also taking the challenges home to foster family connections. "This is the most fun I've had in months," said one participant.

While participants have a positive experience working through the challenges, the time together also helps to meet a vital need for many older adults. One participant shared that the Wits program opportunity fills a hole that is missing in her life. She stated, "I'm going to talk a lot today. I am very lonely." The joy of social interaction and the fulfillment of intellectual engagement can go a long way to help the social and cognitive needs of older adults, as well as revitalize their spirits. It's clear that Wits Workout is making a meaningful difference in the lives of those involved.



WITS WORKOUT



Tai chi supports people who have arthritis or are at risk for falls

Tai chi, a gentle form of exercise, has been extensively studied and proven to be one of the most effective approaches for fall prevention. To bring these benefits to local community members, Illinois Extension in Livingston County piloted the 16-session Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention program, specifically designed for older adults.

This program, created by Dr. Paul Lam of the Tai Chi for Health Institute, is an evidence-based initiative recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for its effectiveness in preventing falls. The program focuses on improving muscular strength, flexibility, and overall fitness, which are crucial for maintaining balance and preventing falls among older adults.

The six participants in the program engaged in a series of slow, deliberate movements that can be adapted to various fitness levels. These movements not only enhance physical health but also promote mental well-being by reducing stress and increasing mindfulness.

Feedback from the pilot program has been overwhelmingly positive. The program has also fostered a sense of community, as participants supported and encouraged each other in their journey toward better health.

As Illinois Extension looks to expand the Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention program in the future, there is exciting potential to reach more aging adults and help them lead healthier, more active lives. By continuing to promote this evidence-based program, Illinois Extension will help to reduce the risk of falls and improve the quality of life in local communities.



Attendees learn and practice poses during Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention class.



Learn about local Family Life programs
go.illinois.edu/LMWFamilyLife



Mindfulness programming reduces stress and creates more resilient communities

Illinois Extension's mindfulness programming initiative has successfully reached 12 sites throughout Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties and engaged 80 people. This program shares valuable information about mindfulness as a stress reduction technique.

Mindfulness, the practice of being present and fully engaged in the moment, has been shown to have numerous benefits for mental and physical health. By incorporating mindfulness into daily routines, individuals can experience reduced stress, improved focus, and a greater sense of well-being.

Participants had the opportunity to learn and practice various mindful techniques, such as breathing practices, mindful eating and listening experiences, and visualizations. One of the favorite activities among participants was making calming jars. Calming jars are a tool for focusing the mind and visualizing oneself, relaxing the mind and emotions.



Calming jars are a big help for many participants, including this one. This participant shows all smiles and expressed how much this meant and how much fun she had.

Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive. One participant stated, "I need more of this in my life. More people need to learn about [mindfulness techniques]."

As Illinois Extension continues to expand its mindfulness programming, staff look forward to reaching even more people and helping them discover the benefits of mindfulness. The goal is to create healthier, more resilient communities where everyone has access to the tools they need to manage stress and improve their overall well-being.



Modern homesteading and self-sufficiency workshop series establishes a regional community of practice

The concepts of self-sufficiency and urban/modern homesteading have gained serious traction in the last several years. The pandemic, inflation, and other factors are seen as some of the driving forces. Because of this trend, Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Nick Frillman developed and released a needs assessment survey for the tri-county area and adjacent counties in March 2024. The survey asked participants to rate their interest in attending homesteading and self-sufficiency-oriented programs and workshops, share their desired format and length of those classes, and rate their preferred choices of class topics and categories. By July 1, there were over 300 responses from McLean, Livingston, and Woodford counties and far beyond.

The Central Illinois Modern Homesteading and Self-Sufficiency Workshop Series launched in August with the first session offered both in person at the McLean County Extension Office and online. Twenty-seven participants heard two presentations from two workshop leaders. The first presentation centered on three principles:

- **Knowing Your Why:** Participants were asked to reflect on why they are interested in leading a more homesteading-centered life.
- **Goal Setting:** The importance of starting small with intentionality was conveyed, and participants chose two goals for the first year of their homesteading journey.
- **Time Management:** Participants went through a time audit to see for themselves where their time goes every week and to begin a conversation about how they could redistribute that time to achieve their goals.

The second presentation that day centered on how participants with growing spaces ranging from acres to square feet could use cover crops in the fall to rejuvenate their garden soils for more successful production of crops in the following spring or even “build” new beds in the same timeframe, using cover crops and minimal materials.

The second workshop in the Central Illinois Modern Homesteading and Self-Sufficiency Series was offered at the Unity Community Center’s Food Production and Demonstration Garden in Normal, with tours of the garden given to would-be homesteaders twice that day. The tour gave participants an extensive look into how to grow a Three Sisters indigenous garden using corn, pole beans, and winter squash. Attendees also learned the basics of how to grow fresh “baby” ginger in central Illinois high tunnels and how to use summer cover crops to suppress problematic weeds. Clarence J., one of the participants who attended both the first and the second workshops, emailed Frillman afterward and said, “For the longest time, I’ve thought that cover crops were just not applicable to me, the small-time home grower. That’s for the big guys, I thought. I was totally wrong! My cover crop seeds are all coming up under my tomatoes and peppers at home right as those plants are finishing up. It’s wonderful. Thanks for giving me the impetus to do this!”

The third workshop on the topic of mead-making was offered in Heyworth in partnership with the Central Illinois Beekeeping Association, and the next two classes took place in Atlanta and Peoria Heights. Every two or three weeks, workshops were facilitated in the tri-county area or in adjacent counties. The goal of these workshops is not to be standalone educational events, but they are meant to be stitched together to form a community of practice that values educational experiences that can be applied to build a desirable way of life.



Weed management field day draws cash grain farmers from across Midwest

Forty-seven organic and conventional farmers from across the Midwest learned about effective weed management during a field day coordinated by Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Nick Frillman, along with Brett Krug, owner/operator of Krug Family Farms in El Paso.

University of Illinois Crop Sciences Department Head Adam Davis taught participants strategies from the organic grain farming world that can help conventional farmers reduce their weed pressure. These strategies include diversifying cash crop rotations to interrupt weed cycles, finding a way to add cover crops into the rotation without impeding profitability, and preventing weeds from going to seed with novel technologies.

National Program Director Mallory Krieger from the Organic Agronomy Testing Service shared the basics of transitioning from conventional to organic processes for cash grain farmers and introduced the Transition to Organic Partnership Program, which can help farmers ease the transition process by offering farmer-to-farmer mentorship programs and free technical assistance from regional, farmer-oriented nonprofits like the Land Connection in Champaign.

After the presentations, farmer attendees toured four different organic fields with Krug, as well as his equipment yard. The tours were full of highly useful Q&A time, and several farmers exchanged contact information in the parking lot.

I've been dealing with Canada thistle in my organic fields on and off for years and have tried several different strategies to get rid of it. I never would have thought to try Sudangrass. Thanks for putting this on. I learned a lot.

Attendee Doug Z.



Adam Davis, department head of crop sciences in the University of Illinois College of ACES, presents during the field day.



Ginger harvested at Unity Garden

Local Illinois Extension Educator wins grant to study fresh ginger cultivation for small farmers

Fresh “baby” ginger is a complex crop to grow for those who have never tried it before. Although it can command a premium price, the cost of seed can be expensive, the time from planting to harvesting can be up to eight months long, and there are plenty of places where growers can go wrong. While it has been grown successfully in greenhouses and high tunnels of the Midwest before by small farmers, there is not a production guide that details the steps of the ginger-growing process for small farmers who have never done it before.

To fill this need, Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Nick Frillman applied for the Illinois Specialty Crop Block Grant program from the Illinois Department of Agriculture to study the best practices of “baby” ginger production in high tunnels and greenhouses across Illinois, working with several other Extension Educators and small farmer collaborators throughout 2025 and 2026. Frillman was notified that the grant proposal was funded with an award of \$70,442 to cover the two-year project expenses, staffing, and more.

The grant will defray the costs of Extension Educators and small farmers to grow fresh ginger from northern to southern and western to eastern Illinois so that in years to come, small farmers and stakeholders across the state will have a better understanding of how to care for this novel, high-value specialty crop.

Local Extension staff, along with Extension Educators and farmers across the state, plan to host statewide ginger field days in 2025 and 2026 for interested farmers, eaters, researchers, and others to see the crop in the ground, learn more about it, and raise awareness of the awesome potential of ginger rhizome as an Illinois specialty crop.





Expanding partnerships lead to more engaging events at Fugate Woods

Livingston County has experienced a mighty expansion of educational programs at Fugate Woods in Fairbury. In partnership with the Prairie Lands Foundation, Master Naturalists and Extension staff coordinated seven public events throughout the year to encourage people of all ages to explore learning in the outdoors. These programs brought together a combined 250 people to experience the beauty of the nature preserves.

Winter Wildlife Tracks was the first event of the year. Local science educator Scott Saffer presented, and participants were led through the preserve in search of fresh animal tracks. The group practiced identifying wildlife from their tracks, and they were able to cast the tracks if desired. Other events that occurred throughout the year included Bugs of Fugate, Meteor Shower Watch Party, Forest Therapy, Creatures of the Night, and Night Owl Prowl. Joan Smeltzer, co-project liaison, commented, “I have heard people from outside the Fairbury area say, ‘I didn’t know this place existed,’ when providing them with information.” It was a great year of leading people to explore natural areas.

With the initiative of outdoor education, Master Naturalists also launched the Fugate Challenge in 2024. This opportunity challenges any individual to experience two events, develop two skills, volunteer twice, and attend two educational programs. The Fugate Challenge has no time limit, no age limit, and no fees. When these eight tasks are completed and signed off by an approved verifier, participants receive a nature-related prize and a window decal to celebrate their accomplishment.

Becky Shafer, co-project liaison, shared, “A five-year-old was the first to complete the Fugate Challenge. Dressed in overalls, he stacked logs as his volunteer work. He experienced fishing off the bridge and photographed cicadas and beetles.” The Master Naturalists of Livingston County are planning more outdoor educational programs for 2025 and look forward to seeing more people there.



Attendees look for animal tracks during the Winter Wildlife Tracks event at Fugate Woods.

Master Naturalist Program Participation



59
Volunteers



12
Hybrid Trainees



4,351
Volunteer Hours



Master Naturalist volunteers get their hands dirty while learning about soil.



Refuge Food Forest receives upgrades through community partners

The Refuge Food Forest in the town of Normal is a unique spot where the community is invited to partake in the array of fresh-growing fruits. From pears and apples to black currants and grapes, there is a harvest everyone can enjoy. Extension partnered with a local scout to help her complete her Eagle Scout project. Megan Litwiller from Troop 9903 set out to create a pollinator patch and was assisted by fellow troop members, family, Master Naturalists, and Extension staff. Litwiller took on the responsibility of mapping the area, researching native plants, designing where plants were to be planted, facilitating the workday of planting, and continuing to care for the plants by watering them throughout the summer.

Litwiller shared, “One highlight of the project was being able to see the before and after photos. While the plants are still small, I envision a bright future with the growing pollinator plants creating a lovely habitat for insects of all kinds. It was a positive experience to see people from the community come together and work on this project collectively.”

The pollinator patch will attract beneficial insects to the area and help pollinate the fruit for bountiful harvests, continuing the gifts of produce at the Refuge Food Forest.

Exploring our solar helper

Illinois Extension teamed up with Earthrise Energy to educate youth about solar energy. Local counties continue to see new developments with renewable energy sources, and this is a great way to start the conversation. Through an educational coloring book titled “The Sun Our Solar Helper,” those who color learn about the many functions of the sun, including light, warmth, photosynthesis, the sun’s role in the water cycle, and how we can utilize the sun as an energy source.

These coloring books were distributed by Earthrise Energy at the summer county fairs and will continue to be used by Extension staff in future related programming. This project not only impacts local counties but also is available statewide.



View the coloring book and download pages
extension.illinois.edu/energy/solar-energy

Earth Day kits program expands to serve youth in Livingston and Woodford counties

Over 1,500 fifth graders in 74 classrooms across Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties celebrated Earth Day in 2024 with help from Illinois Extension.

Earth Day takes place annually on April 22, promoting environmental awareness and actions to protect the planet. Illinois Extension Horticulture and 4-H STEAM in the Classroom staff teamed up to develop six lessons and hands-on activities for teachers to lead their students in this environmental movement. The kits covered topics including oil spill clean-up, water cycle, web of life, geology, and more.



1,596

5th grade students who learned about the environment through Extension’s Earth Day kits

The Earth Day kits provided each year by the Illinois Extension office have offered my classroom not only exposure to environmental ideas and lessons, but also the opportunity to learn about this topic in an exciting, hands-on way! We are able to use these effective materials to celebrate Earth Day as a grade level by incorporating an eco-based field day into our fifth grade curriculum. Students look forward to learning about our planet and easily recall what they’ve learned to apply to outside scenarios. We’re so thankful for the opportunities these kits provide each year!

Amy Kelly, fifth grade teacher



Volunteers combine art and pollinators at the Illinois Art Station

The Illinois Art Station in Normal serves a multitude of purposes and communities, making it a key project site for both Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists. This joint program and project partnership continues to grow, strengthening the effort for environmental education through the butterfly garden and summer camps.

The Monarch Waystation and Habitat Stewardship Initiative at the Illinois Art Station project received the Illinois Master Gardener Teamwork Award in 2024, which honors projects that have made a difference in the community or Extension unit.

Established in 2022, the butterfly garden and the native plants have become well established with a wide variety of nectar-rich plants, including four native species of milkweed, the host plant for the monarch butterfly. Next up is the introduction of spring ephemerals for the early spring pollinators visiting the garden. Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists continue to tackle invasive species and unwanted plants from the wooded area bordering the butterfly garden beds, including but not limited to the notorious garlic mustard and pokeweed.

Educational activities about pollination and the importance of pollinators were provided to children attending the Illinois Art Station summer camps in June and July. The sessions engaged children in dissecting flowers, learning about different



A summer camp attendee displays his pollinator garden kit.

pollinators, collecting pollinator data in the flower garden, and learning about the beloved monarch butterflies and their annual migration to Mexico. Youth examined actual monarch eggs, larvae, and a chrysalis; studied the migration pathway and roll-played monarchs migrating; and assessed the butterfly garden's suitability as a monarch waystation. Campers also created art for the garden, including toad houses, butterfly puddlers, and plant labels.



Learn about the Illinois Art Station
illinoisartstation.org

Master Gardener Program Participation



105
Volunteers



12
Volunteers Who Completed Their Internships



8,411
Volunteer Hours



Master Gardeners offer community support and education through Help Desks and community booths

Master Gardeners continue to be a trusted source for research-based gardening information throughout the community. Help Desks at the Extension offices and local libraries are open to the public to ask gardening questions or advice. Master Gardeners also set up information tables and activity stations at community events throughout the growing season.

Cicadas were all the buzz in spring 2024, with the emergence of the periodical cicadas in Illinois. Many community members turned to the Master Gardeners during this time of concern, worried about the effect of these alien-like insects on their plants. “Will they kill my plants? How do I keep them off my trees? When should we expect the cicadas in central Illinois?” were all common questions.

Throughout the year, Master Gardeners also assisted homeowners in interpreting soil test results and offered recommendations to enhance soil fertility. They guided new gardeners in starting raised beds for growing vegetables for their families, addressed concerns about large shade trees with dying branches, and helped identify unknown plants in landscapes.

Weekly office hours at the Extension offices are hosted by Master Gardeners, allowing the public to ask questions via phone, email, or in person. They also engage in community education through booths at farmers’ markets in Bloomington, Downs, and Eureka Library, as well as at county fairs and various local events. Additionally, Extension staff provide demonstrations on a range of horticulture topics, including pollinator plants, seed saving, and garden pests, to educate the community.



1,668
Market and booth contacts



254
Help Desk contacts

Giving Gardens continues to grow through community partnerships



The Giving Gardens program, which aims to increase access to healthy food and enhance well-being in communities, took on a new significance in 2024. It fostered camaraderie and teamwork among co-workers, who innovatively came together to support their clientele and community. A new partnership emerged with staff at the McLean County Law and Justice Center after a dedicated volunteer and former Giving Garden participant proposed expanding the program. As a result, 30 McLean County government staff members committed to growing and giving to McLean County Probation Service clients.

Giving Gardeners grew plants gifted by Illinois Extension—tomatoes, bell peppers, jalapeno peppers, and cucumbers—in their backyards and pledged to donate at least 50% back to someone in need. In return, Illinois Extension guided them through the growing process, from prepping the soil to proper harvest techniques, through a monthly online newsletter.

Recognizing that not everyone facing food insecurity can visit a community food pantry or has space to garden, over 1,000 Adult and Juvenile Court Services clients and their families had access to the Giving Garden produce and resources through this new partnership. They received bags of fresh produce, cheerful flower bouquets, healthy recipes, and information on community resources during their weekly check-ins.



3,925
Pounds of produce donated



373
Flower arrangements gifted

This initiative sparked new conversations and excitement among co-workers as they shared their experiences with new crops, discussed plans for the next year, and reflected on the positive impact that fresh produce and resources had on their clients.

An additional 150 community gardeners and organizations also participated in the program in 2024 to help increase healthy food access to their neighbors, food pantries, homeless shelters, schools, senior centers, social service/community agencies, and nursing homes throughout Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties.

Giving Gardens are my way of spreading a hug to a heart that needs it.

McLean County Giving Gardener



Learn about the Giving Gardens
go.illinois.edu/GivingGarden



McLean County 4-H Participation



992

4-H Members



126

4-H Volunteers



4,458

County Show Projects

599

County Show Exhibitors



Celebrating 4-H volunteers with ice cream and fellowship

McLean County 4-H is powered by incredible volunteers who give their time and talents year after year, ensuring that local programs continue to thrive and grow. To express gratitude for their dedication, Illinois Extension hosted the first-ever Volunteer Appreciation Ice Cream Social in 2024. This special event was open to all 4-H volunteers, members of the Extension Foundation, Extension Council, and their families.

The Ice Cream Social was an open house-style event featuring a fun ice cream bar and engaging activities for everyone. It provided a wonderful opportunity for volunteers to connect with one another and with staff, fostering the sense of community that makes McLean County 4-H so special. Special guest Kevin Carey, acting director of 4-H Youth Development and senior program lead for Positive Youth Development, mingled with attendees throughout the evening and shared thoughtful remarks.

It was an evening filled with fellowship, fun, and, of course, ice cream as we celebrated and thanked the amazing volunteers who make McLean County 4-H possible.



Easton Haag happily participates in the Cloverbud Connection.

Cloverbud Connection provides learning and fun for all ages

The Cloverbud Connection event provided a hands-on learning opportunity for both Cloverbud-aged youth 5 to 7 years old and the adults who support them. During the workshop, youth had the chance to learn basic clay sculpting skills to create hand-sculpted air-dry clay pots. This activity not only allowed participants to express their artistic abilities but also served as a helpful project idea for Cloverbud Show and Tell at the fair.

While the youth focused on their clay projects, parents, volunteers, and leaders experienced a demonstration of one approach to leading a 4-H Cloverbud meeting. This dual focus ensured that both youth and adults left with valuable skills and knowledge. Additionally, Cloverbud volunteer resources were made available, offering guidance to those interested in supporting or leading the program. Attendees also had the chance to ask questions and engage in discussions about the Cloverbud experience.

Although the workshop primarily catered to youth already enrolled in 4-H, it was also open to those who were not yet enrolled, providing them with an opportunity to explore the benefits of the 4-H Cloverbud program. It was a perfect introduction for families to see how the 4-H experience can grow with their child, offering a foundation in creativity, confidence, and essential life skills.



Chick It Out program sparks curiosity in embryology

Spring is always an exciting time at Illinois Extension, and 2024 was no exception as the Chick It Out program took flight once again, introducing young minds to the fascinating world of embryology. For 2024, the program expanded to include a new opportunity tailored for at-home learners, providing a hands-on experience for homeschooling families and in-home daycares.

In April, 42 participants gathered at the McLean County Extension office, ready to embark on their embryology adventure. Sessions engaged children across various age groups, with 11 groups attending in total, 9 of which were first-time participants.

In addition to the at-home sessions, the Chick It Out program continued to thrive in classrooms across the county. Classroom teachers, both new and seasoned veterans, were offered virtual professional development opportunities to ensure a successful hatch at their schools. These sessions provided educators with key insights into the embryology process, from setting up incubators to troubleshooting hatching issues. This ongoing support ensured that students in classrooms could fully engage in the magic of watching their chicks develop and hatch.

In both settings, the Chick It Out program featured a range of interactive activities to help children explore the world inside an egg. At the at-home learner sessions, the following activities were offered:

- Parts of an Egg Craft: provided creative exploration of the anatomy of an egg.
- Parts of an Incubator: offered insight into the role incubators play in chick development.
- Chick Development Egg Hunt: guided learners through the day-by-day growth of a chick inside the egg.
- Candling Eggs: a highlight that allowed participants to see developing chicks in real-time.

Each participant, whether in the classroom or at the Extension office, left with a packet of activities to continue their learning journey at home or in school. The program was especially impactful for the homeschooling and daycare communities, offering a unique opportunity to engage in a learning experience that was previously unavailable due to limitations in incubator lending. In schools, the additional professional development for teachers ensured that even more students could experience the joy of chick embryology. Thanks to the efforts of the Chick It Out team, both at-home learners and classroom students were able to explore the fascinating world of chick development and hatching.



Learn more about McLean County 4-H
go.illinois.edu/McLean4H

Livingston County 4-H Participation



393

4-H Members



34

4-H Volunteers



18

Community 4-H Clubs

10

Cloverbud 4-H Clubs



4-H members learn the judge's ranking during the Livingston County 4-H Goat Show.



A Livingston County 4-H member tells the judge about her Horticulture project during the 4-H Show.



Learn more about Livingston County 4-H
go.illinois.edu/Livingston4H

Woodford County 4-H Participation



389
4-H Members



63
4-H Volunteers



23
4-H Clubs (includes Community clubs, Cloverbud clubs, SPIN clubs, and Federation)



Youth learn through hands-on activities during the first Livestock Learn and Fun Day.



Livestock Learn and Fun Day

Woodford County successfully hosted its first Livestock Learn and Fun Day at Woodford Farm Bureau Park in the spring, bringing together 41 enthusiastic youth from the tri-county area. The day provided a mixture of hands-on experiences and educational opportunities focused on a variety of livestock species, ensuring participants gained both practical skills and a deeper understanding of animal care and management.

Throughout the day, youth rotated through interactive stations, each dedicated to a different species. Whether learning how to properly handle cattle, understanding the feeding requirements of swine, or exploring best practices for shearing, every activity was engaging and informative. Trained professionals and experienced local farmers guided participants, answering questions and offering tips to foster a deeper appreciation for the responsibilities involved in raising livestock.

Looking ahead, there are plans to rotate this event annually between the three counties, allowing each community to host the fantastic learning experience. Doing so will strengthen inter-county relationships and make it more accessible to youth across the region.

School programming reaches students at Lowpoint-Washburn

During the 2023–2024 school year, Illinois Extension 4-H staff delivered monthly lessons to grades kindergarten through eighth in the Lowpoint-Washburn School District. Students in grades sixth through eighth engaged in career exploration lessons, while students in grades kindergarten through fifth covered a wide range of subjects, including health and wellness, social-emotional learning, animal science, STEM, space exploration, and much more.

The lessons aimed to broaden students' understanding of various fields through interactive, hands-on activities. Whether students were building models in a STEM project, learning about the science behind their health, or exploring how astronauts prepare for space travel, each lesson was designed to be informative and fun.

This comprehensive approach allowed staff to connect with 11 classrooms, leaving a lasting impression on students and teachers alike. Thanks to the success of the program and the positive feedback, the schools have invited Extension back for the next school year. Building on this momentum, more students will be reached in 2025 and will be able to explore new and exciting topics.



Lowpoint-Washburn students learned about nature through lessons from 4-H staff.



Lowpoint-Washburn students used nanobots to learn about coding during a STEM lesson.



Learn more about Woodford County 4-H
go.illinois.edu/Woodford4H





Beyond the local level: Ag Innovators Experience

Alcha Corban, 4-H youth development educator, and Katie Buckley, county director, spearheaded the creation of the 2024 National Ag Innovators Experience program Protect the Plate. Sponsored by the National 4-H Council and Bayer, this program was crafted to deliver an interactive and visually engaging educational experience. Protect the Plate offers youth a culturally relevant opportunity to explore the journey of food from farm to table, emphasizing the challenges faced by producers and consumers. It underscored the vital roles played by governmental agencies in safeguarding agricultural products.

The program was implemented by four external land grant institutions with a goal of engaging 4,000 youth by the summer. As of July 2024, the program had reached 5,547 youth and trained 74 Teen Leaders.

The 4-H Ag Innovators Experience features a series of challenges in which participants delve into various agricultural innovations. Working in small teams, students tackle scenarios that address real-world issues encountered by farmers, government entities, and consumers alike. Challenges focus on pest management, EPA regulations, and foodborne illnesses. By completing these challenges, participants develop a deeper understanding of the food production process and effective food handling practices.

Each 4-H Ag Innovators Experience is a dynamic 60-minute activity featuring three challenges tailored for third to eighth grade youth, along with teaching opportunities for older teens. This versatile program is well-suited for various settings, including summer camps, 4-H club meetings, summer reading programs, after-school activities, special events, and collaborations with schools. All activities are aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards to ensure educational relevance and rigor.

The national training for teen leaders, selected by their land grant universities, took place at the University of Illinois campus in January. During this training, teen leaders engaged in hands-on learning experiences covering safe food handling practices, foodborne illnesses, integrated pest management, and pesticide safety. Faculty from the University of Illinois provided expertise and discussed career pathways in food safety and agriculture. Following background sessions, teen leaders conducted teach-backs with each other and 4-H staff.

As of July 2024, four land grant universities have conducted 106 presentations to introduce the program to young participants. These presentations have been diverse, taking place in settings such as schools, after-school programs, clubs, and camps.



Youth learn about the journey of food from farm to table through a game that was developed as part of the Ag Innovators Experience.

Many program participants came from urban, low-income, underserved, and/or disconnected communities with limited exposure to agriculture.

Each of the four universities also developed a plan for international outreach. In Missouri, teen leaders connected virtually with a tenth grade biology class at Zamorano Pan-American Agricultural University in Honduras, guiding students through activities and awarding certificates. In Iowa, the program engaged high school youth from Japan who were visiting the Iowa State University campus as part of the States 4-H Exchange with translated materials to facilitate discussions on agricultural differences. Nebraska Extension partnered with the Lincoln Salvation Army and Lincoln Chinese Church to extend outreach to refugee and community groups. In North Carolina, the NC 4-H Military Partnerships scheduled a training session for teens from a Navy installation in Bahrain, led by Yancy County teens who also led a workshop the following week in an after-school setting.

Corban and Bukely combined their expertise to create this innovative program. Their teamwork extended beyond program development to successful implementation across multiple educational settings such as schools, after-school programs, camps, and community events. Through their joint leadership, the program reached thousands of young participants, particularly targeting urban, low-income, and underserved communities with limited exposure to agriculture. Their dedication and strategic collaboration not only met but surpassed their outreach goals, making a tangible impact on youth education and fostering a deeper understanding of agricultural processes and food safety practices. Their partnership serves as a testament to the power of collaborative efforts in creating meaningful educational initiatives that benefit communities across the country.



Unity Community Center

Youth at the Unity Community Center had another full year of exploration. From therapy dogs to solar systems, 68 students, from primarily kindergarten through fifth grade, were exposed to 25 different program partners who led them through hands-on learning experiences. These programs challenged them to problem solve, be creative, and work together to accomplish their goals.

Friends of the Constitution Trail

In the spring semester, the Friends of the Constitution Trail conducted a bike safety seminar for 25 participants in grades K-12. They learned every aspect of bicycle safety, including checking tire pressure, proper use of a safety helmet, when to use bike horns and bells, and the proper use of reflectors. With the assistance of Unity staff, parents, and the Friends of the Constitution Trail, the trainees rode mountain bikes supplied through an outdoor bike course. For many, it was their very first time riding a bicycle.

Children's Discovery Museum

In the summer, the Children's Discovery Museum provided an amazing hands-on opportunity to re-create a model miniature golf course. Unity students started the day with a field trip to Grady's Miniature Golf in Bloomington. They had fun navigating through windmills and water traps. Upon their return, CDM staff assisted with building the models using materials like bamboo, balsa wood, pipe cleaners, glitter, and colored plastic foam. Students kept their colorful models to show their friends and family.

Food Distribution

A unique characteristic of the Unity Community Center is the garden. Throughout the years, this garden has grown and shifted, but the one constant is that it is a learning ground for



Attendees were all smiles during the annual Unity Gives Thanks event.

Unity youth. This year, with the help of Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Nick Frillman and his team, the garden was plentiful, and Unity was able to distribute 2220 pounds of food to the local community.

Unity Gives Thanks

With an increase in participants at Unity's after-school program and in the range of programs offered, there was no better way to show our appreciation for our community partners and families than with a celebration. Unity staff hosted and organized its annual Unity Gives Thanks event in November. Fifteen families with more than 20 students attended. We provided a holiday meal where families, partners, and volunteers connected, laughed, and showed appreciation to one another. Unity students shared with attendees a pumpkin craft with what they are thankful for. We gave out over 10 certificates of appreciation to our community partners, recognizing their outstanding service and dedication.



30 Male 35 Female 3 No Answer



1 American Indian 14 Asian 37 Black 6 White 2 Two or more 6 No Answer



44 Volunteers

Extension Council Members

Extension Council is authorized by the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, in accordance with state law, to be actively involved in the operation of University of Illinois Extension. Councils advise unit Extension personnel on a variety of matters, but Extension personnel remain responsible for the final decisions necessary to the development and administration of the local program. Members assist Extension staff with planning, implementing, and marketing educational programs designed to meet the needs, interests, and resources of the local communities. Additionally, members help secure financial resources and recruit volunteers. Members serve as liaisons between the public and Extension. Some responsibilities of Council Members include:

- Assess community needs.
- Serve as a communication channel between the community and the Extension offices.
- Identify and utilize community leaders.
- Provide a forum where dissenting viewpoints can be discussed.
- Turn negative criticism into positive programs.
- Help ensure broad-based programs are available.

Livingston

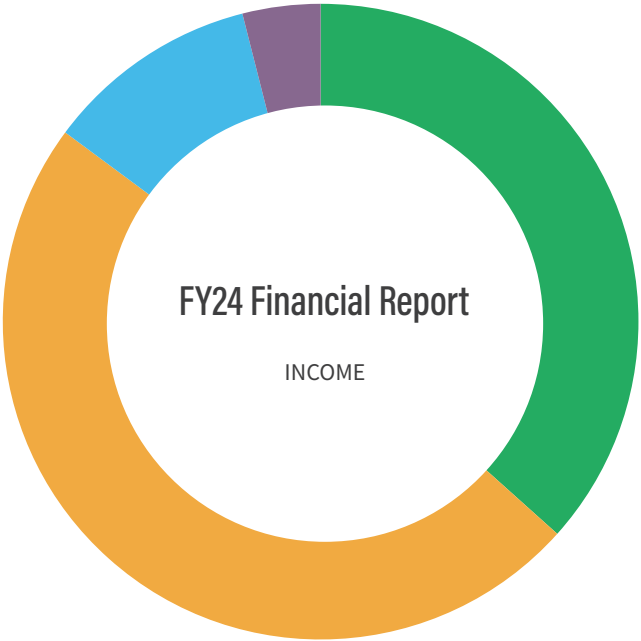
Tera Graves
Grace Kaisner
(youth)
Mara Knobloch
Debbie Ruff
Amy Schlipf

McLean

Dylan Cook
Glenn Harbin
Alana Whitfield
(youth)
Jeff Woodard

Woodford

Mark Baran
Lisa Maynard
Jodi Upchurch
Paul Wilkins



Amount	Source
37%	County Board Levies
49%	State Match
11%	Smith-Lever Federal Funds
4%	Gifts/Donations



Amount	Source
59%	Salaries
20%	Rent/Leases/Utilities
9%	Program Educational Services & Supplies
9%	General Services
4%	Travel
1%	Accommodation Expenses



\$297,459.39
FY24 SNAP-Ed Expenses

Media Engagement in 2024



14,283
Facebook page likes (across 9 local pages)



13,243
Facebook page followers (across 9 local pages)



325
YouTube subscribers



1,000+
Print and digital media mentions



15,225
Views of Leading Local blog posts

STAFF

Katie Buckley
County Director

Erin Estes
Business Administrative
Associate

Rajinie Alexandre
Office Support Specialist

Rosemarie Carter
Office Support Assistant,
McLean

Kathryn Davis
Office Support Assistant,
Livingston

RaeJean Kuntz
Office Support Assistant,
Woodford

Abigail Byrnside
Marketing Program
Coordinator

Celeste Shanahan
Publicity and Promotion
Program Coordinator

Alcha Corban
4-H Youth Development
Educator, Livingston and
Woodford

Myla Munro
4-H Youth Development
Educator, McLean

Emily Brunch
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator,
Livingston

Heather Hoffman
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator, STEAM
in the Classroom, McLean

Mikayla Peters
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator, McLean

Blaine Troyer
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator,
Woodford

Michelle Vincent
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator, McLean

Nick Frillman
Local Food Systems and Small
Farms Educator

Brittnay Haag
Horticulture Educator

Darci Webber
Natural Resources,
Environment, and Energy
Educator

Anna Maleske
Agriculture and Natural
Resources Program
Coordinator

Alison Meanor
Agriculture and Natural
Resources Program
Coordinator

Kayla Powers
Agriculture and Natural
Resources Program
Coordinator

Sara Attig
Family Life Educator

Staci Coussens
SNAP-Ed Educator

Jenna Smith
Nutrition and Wellness
Educator

Sky Holland
Family and Consumer Sciences
Program Coordinator

Beverly Branz
SNAP-Ed Community Worker,
Livingston

Beth Kraft
SNAP-Ed Community Worker,
McLean

Robin Etnyre
Unity Community Center
Manager

Lilyana Montes De Oca
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator, Unity
Community Center

Jeffrey Walsh
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator, Unity
Community Center

OFFICE INFORMATION

Livingston County Extension
1412 S Locust
Pontiac, IL 61764
(815) 842-1776
Email: uie-lmw@illinois.edu

McLean County Extension
1615 Commerce Parkway
Bloomington, IL 61704
(309) 663-8306

Woodford County Extension
109 E Eureka Avenue
Eureka, IL 61530
(309) 467-3789

Unity Community Center
632 Orlando Avenue
Normal, IL 61761
(309) 862-4041

ONLINE



go.illinois.edu/LMW



facebook.com/UofIExtensionLMW



youtube.com/@UIExtensionUnit12



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs are funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.