

Extension Connections Newsletter

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Allergy Awareness Month

Kristin Bogdonas, Illinois Extension nutrition and wellness educator

May is Allergy Awareness Month! Did you know 33 million Americans have food allergies? That's 1 in 10 adults and 1 in 13 children, and allergy prevalence is on the rise.

A food allergy is when your body's immune system reacts to a certain food. Signs and symptoms can include hives, vomiting, swelling of the lips, face, tongue, or throat, difficulty breathing, and, in severe cases, anaphylactic shock—a life-threatening reaction that affects the whole body.

There are now nine major food allergens: peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, wheat, soybeans, and sesame. While 9 foods account for most food allergies in the U.S., virtually any food can cause an allergic reaction. Even a very small amount of the problem food is enough to cause a reaction.

Can people outgrow their food allergies? Yes, it's possible! For example, many children outgrow food allergies to milk, soy, eggs, and wheat. However, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish are less likely to be outgrown.

Taking care when dining out with food allergies

Food allergies are not only life-threatening, they are also life-altering. People with food allergies must always be vigilant to avoid foods they are allergic to. Dining out presents additional challenges when certain foods need to be avoided. Here are 5 tips to take care when dining out:

- Choose the right kind of eating establishment.
- Call ahead or check out their menu beforehand.
- Dine early or late.
- Clearly explain your dietary restrictions.
- Confirm your order before eating and thank your server for their help.

Allergens can appear in unexpected places. For example, fish or shellfish are sometimes dipped in milk to reduce their fishy odor, posing a problem for people with milk allergy. Never assume anything about how a food has been made or served.

Don't be afraid to ask questions about ingredients before eating a food that you have not prepared yourself. Common foods with hidden allergens include marinades, sauces, fried foods, seasoned rice/vegetables, and salads. To learn more about food allergies, hidden sources, and allergy-friendly recipes, visit foodallergy.org.



Horticulture Helpline | Wednesdays, 9 am - noon
(309) 756-9978 | Illinois Extension, Milan, IL

Have a Plant Question? Ask the Master Gardeners!

Our Horticulture Helpline is open every Wednesday from 9 AM to Noon.

Call us at (309) 756-9978 or stop by the Extension office at 321 W 2nd Ave in Milan to speak with a Master Gardener in person. You can also

get answers anytime by filling out our online form at

go.illinois.edu/askthemastergardener.

We're here to help with your gardening questions!



Plant Sunflowers in Mid-May for Summer Beauty and Pollinator Power

Emily Swihart, Illinois Extension horticulture educator



If you're looking for a cheerful, easy-to-grow flower that does more than just brighten your garden, consider planting sunflowers this spring. Sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) are North American natives, and mid-May is the perfect time to sow seeds directly into your garden soil.

These fast-growing annuals thrive in full sun and tolerate a wide range of soil conditions—including low fertility. Available in a wide range of sizes and colors, sunflowers are an easy choice addition to any garden.

Garden Favorite and Cut Flower King

Thanks to their vibrant appeal and adaptability, sunflowers remain one of the most popular cut flowers. Gardeners today can choose from a wide variety of cultivars, including branching and non-branching types, pollen and pollen-less blooms, and plants ranging from 18 inches to 14 feet tall. Colors now span beyond the familiar golden yellow to include white, red, plum, lemon, and even multi-colored varieties.

Sunflowers grow best in full sun and should be planted after the last frost. Direct seeding is easy due to the large seed size. Water seedlings regularly until established; once growing, sunflowers are fairly drought-tolerant. These tough plants thrive in low-nutrient soils and typically require little to no fertilizer—too much can even reduce flowering. Pests and diseases are minimal, though proper spacing and crop rotation help prevent issues.

For cut flowers, harvest when petals just begin to open. Strip lower leaves and place stems in clean water—no floral preservative needed—for long-lasting arrangements.

More Than Just a Pretty Face

- **Pollinator-Friendly:** Sunflower pollen supports bee health and may help reduce parasites.
- **Sun-Chasing:** Young plants follow the sun across the sky to maximize growth.
- **Soil Helpers:** Sunflowers can absorb heavy metals, helping restore damaged soil.

Sunflowers bring beauty, benefit pollinators, and are one of the easiest flowers to grow from seed—making them a perfect pick for gardeners of all ages. **Plant in mid-May** and enjoy vibrant blooms, buzzing bees, and backyard beauty all summer long.



Actions to Reduce Water Pollution: Everyday Environment Webinar | May 8, 1 pm

Discover what the most common water pollutants are and how you can prevent water pollution by paying attention to what you put down the drain at home and how you manage your yard. Explore how the water treatment process cleans water before it returns to lakes, rivers, and streams.

Register at go.illinois.edu/waterpollution



Honey and Health: Nature's Sweet Treat May 15, 10 am

Discover the benefits of honey, nature's perfect gift from flower nectar. With 320 varieties differing in color, odor, and flavor, honey's popularity has grown due to its nutritional and therapeutic uses. We'll cover the basics and share delicious recipes to try at home.

Register at go.illinois.edu/lessonsforliving2025

FOUR SEASONS GARDENING

Managing Common Squash and Pumpkin Pests | May 20, 1:30 pm

Pumpkins and squash are popular garden plants. However, many gardeners struggle with pests attacking their plants. Learn about common pests that affect squash, pumpkin, cucumber, and melon plants, as well as how to manage them.

Register at go.illinois.edu/4SGPests

Grow Food. Share the Harvest. Join GIFT Gardens!



A new program—GIFT Gardens (Growing Illowa Food Together)—will bring together gardeners of all levels to grow and donate fresh produce to local food pantries. It is a collaboration between Tapestry Farms, Illinois and Iowa State Extensions and River Bend Food Bank. Join our interest list go.illinois.edu/sproutandshare

Optional orientation sessions will be held at Tapestry Farms, 121 W. 12th Street, Davenport:

- Tuesday, May 6 at 7 PM
- Saturday, May 10 at 10 AM

Get tips from horticulture experts and be connected with a pantry near you. Participation is free, and orientation is encouraged but not required.

Sign up or learn more: <https://shorturl.at/7TGJE>

Questions? Email giftgardens@tapestryfarms.org



Health & Wellness Library Programs in May

Join Illinois Extension Nutrition & Wellness Educator Kristin Bogdonas for these upcoming sessions:

Healthy Behaviors for a Healthy Immune System May 15 | 2–3 PM

Rock Island Library, 2715 30th St.

Learn how nutrition, sleep, activity, and stress management work together to support a strong immune system.

Register: go.illinois.edu/HealthBehaviors

Tools to Manage Diabetes

May 20 | 2–3 PM

Kewanee Public Library, 102 S Tremont St.

Get tips for planning meals and snacks—plus take home a free portion plate!

Call (309) 852-4505 to register.

Free Pressure Canner Testing Available Through Illinois Extension

Planning to can your summer harvest? Make sure your dial-gauge pressure canner is accurate and safe. Illinois Extension offers **free pressure canner testing** to help home canners prepare for the season.

Locally, you can bring your canner to **Kristin Bogdonas, Nutrition and Wellness Educator**, at our **Milan office**. You can also drop off your canner at our **Mercer County office in Viola** or the **Henry/Stark office in Galva**, but please allow extra time as testing is done in Milan.



Testing takes about 15 minutes and ensures your dial gauge reads correctly. Inaccurate gauges can result in under-processed foods, which can pose serious health risks like botulism.

To learn more about safe home food preservation, visit Extension's Food Preservation website extension.illinois.edu/food-preservation or check out recordings at go.illinois.edu/ILExtensionCanningVideos



Illinois Invasive Species Symposium | May 28, 9:30 am - 3:30 pm Champaign County Extension Office.

Join Illinois Extension at the 10th annual Invasive Species Symposium to get the latest research updates, learn management recommendations, celebrate removal success stories, network with colleagues, and ask questions. University of Illinois experts will present on emerging threats, Asian carp, tick responses, restoration projects, and more. Open to professionals, students, landowners, farmers, foresters, volunteers, and environmental stewards.

Fee: \$20. Find topics and presenters at go.illinois.edu/InvasiveSymposium.

Summer Youth Program Helps Build Emergency Planning Skills

Zombie Apocalypse Now: Survival Skills for Middle Schoolers

Illinois Extension and Disaster Ready Quad Cities is teaming up with **Black Hawk College's Summer Youth Programs** to bring a thrilling and educational workshop **Zombie Apocalypse Now!**

Aimed at students in **6th to 8th grade**, this four-day camp uses a fun, zombie-themed scenario to teach real-world geography and survival skills. When the zombies attack, where will you go? What will you need to survive? And how would you rebuild? These questions offer a creative way to explore map reading, spatial awareness, and emergency planning.

Led by Brett Monnard, this camp runs **Monday -Thursday, June 23-26**, at Black Hawk College in Moline.

Register now at go.illinois.edu/Zombie.

Cost: \$95

For more info or to see other summer programs, visit www.bhc.edu/pace or call (309) 796-8223.



Explore Prairie Conservation: Free Conservation Tours in McDonough County

Join conservation-minded residents and landowners across McDonough County for a series of free tours showcasing native plantings, restored prairies, and the connection between nature and well-being. They are offered between May 16 and August 9. Here's what's coming up:

May 16 | Shawn Meager Home Woodland Garden Tour | 4:30–6:30 PM

Biology professor Shawn Meager has transformed his small yard into a thriving habitat, replacing lawn with native woodland and prairie plants. His yard is now a personal oasis, alive with returning wildflowers, pollinators, and birds. Learn how native landscaping, inspired by Doug Tallamy's Homegrown National Park™ concept, can bring joy and ecological value to your own backyard.

May 31 | Prairie Land Conservancy & McDonough Co. Health Department Wellness Walk | 9:00–11:00 AM

Held at the scenic Wigwam Hollow Bird Sanctuary, this new collaboration blends nature and wellness. Bring binoculars for birdwatching and explore how green spaces improve human health during this peaceful and educational walk, led by your local land trust and health department.

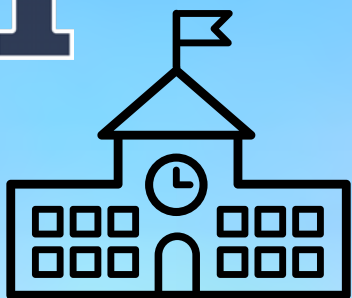
June 7, 9:00–11:00 AM – Williams Woods and Prairie Tour
July 5, 8:30–11:00 AM – Brent Fowler Prairie Wagon Tour
July 12, 9:00–11:00 AM – Owsley Prairie and Wetlands Tour
July 25, 5:30–7:30 PM – Gerald White Prairie Wagon Tour
July 26, 9:00–11:00 AM – Gerald White Prairie Wagon Tour
August 9, 8:30–11:00 AM – Brent Fowler Prairie Wagon Tour



These tours are free, but space is limited. Exact addresses will be emailed to registered participants. Sign up only for events you plan to attend. Register at: go.illinois.edu/ConservationTours

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Illinois Extension



RURAL ROOTS FAMILY FUN DAY



Tues, May 27 11 am - 1 pm

Wyoming Public Library

109 N. 7th St. Wyoming, IL



Bring the family to the Wyoming Public Library May 27 and join Illinois Extension for a fun day of learning as you celebrate our agricultural heritage!

- **Hands-On Stations:** Explore agriculture, gardening, nutrition, and 4-H activities.
- **Games & Prizes:** Kids - after you visit the stations, fill out a passport to win a prize.
- **Petting Zoo:** All ages will enjoy seeing the live farm animals at the free petting zoo!
- **Lunch:** Buy a hot dog meal with chips, applesauce, cookie, and a drink for \$5.
- **Visit the Library!** Step inside for more fun!
- **Free Resources:** Pick up IL Extension information, grocery tote, and recipe cards, (while supplies last).