

## Extension Connections Newsletter

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### Back-to-School Mealtime Made Easy

*Kristin Bogdonas, Illinois Extension nutrition and wellness educator*

As the school year kicks off, evenings quickly fill with homework, sports practices, activities, and looming deadlines. With so much on your plate, dinner shouldn't be another source of stress. The good news? A little weekend prep can help you sail through the week with healthy, low-stress meals that keep your family fueled and focused.

- **Start by setting aside one day to plan and prep meals for the week ahead.** Chop veggies, cook a large batch of grains, shred some chicken, or simmer a pot of chili. Pre-portioning ingredients and storing them in the fridge makes it easy to throw meals together on even the busiest weeknights.
- **Double batches are your best friend.** Cook once and eat twice by freezing leftovers or repurposing them into the next day's lunch. Think roast chicken on Monday, chicken quesadillas on Tuesday. Shortcuts like rotisserie chicken, frozen veggies, and canned beans can also help you save time without sacrificing nutrition.
- **Looking for ways to please picky eaters or make meals more fun?** Try build-your-own nights like taco bars, pasta bowls, or baked potato bars. Customizing meals keeps everyone happy—and gets dinner on the table faster.
- **And don't forget the snacks!** Keep a stash of grab-and-go options like yogurt parfaits, energy bites, veggie sticks with hummus, or apple slices with peanut butter. These quick bites are perfect between school and evening events or as a healthy bedtime snack.

With a bit of planning, a stocked fridge, and flexible routines, weeknight meals can become a bright spot in your day rather than a burden. Give yourself the gift of a little prep—and enjoy more time around the table and less time in the kitchen.



### Waste-Free Lunches: Small Changes, Big Impact

Every day, food, packaging, and plastic utensils from lunches end up in the trash—and in landfills. In fact, 40% of food in the U.S. goes uneaten, wasting billions of dollars and valuable natural resources. Meanwhile, plastics and paper from lunch packaging contribute to the country's growing waste problem.

Packing a waste-free lunch—with reusable containers, cloth napkins, and food your family will actually eat—can help cut down on waste and save money. Compared to a typical disposable lunch, you could save over \$240 per year with a waste-free approach.

Ready to reduce waste and make lunch more sustainable? Check out the Zero Waste Guide at [www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/76040](https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/76040)



## Small Habits, Big Impact

When you think about the habits you carry out every day—buckling your seatbelt, brushing your teeth, checking your phone—do you remember when they first started? Probably not. That’s because habits become automatic, shaped by repetition and routine. But what if we were just as intentional about building habits that improve our health, relationships, and finances?

The choices we make each day—what we eat, how we move, how much we sleep, how we manage stress or money—might seem small in the moment, but over time they shape our lives. Consider this: fewer than one in 10 Americans eat enough vegetables, and fewer than one in four youth get the recommended amount of physical activity. Meanwhile, nearly one in five children struggles with obesity, and money remains the number one cause of stress for U.S. adults.

Our habits can also affect how we cope emotionally. Building self-regulation skills, like managing emotions after a tough day or staying calm under pressure, can improve self-esteem and strengthen relationships. The same goes for habits around sleep, hygiene, and even screen time—on average, Americans spend over 12 hours a day on electronic devices.

The good news? You can create new, healthier habits with small, consistent steps. Whether it's adding more vegetables to your plate, walking each morning, or tracking your spending, simple actions—when repeated over time—can lead to big changes.

Explore practical ways to build better habits and boost your well-being with this In the Moment fact sheet from University of Illinois Extension: [go.illinois.edu/HealthyHabitsTips](https://go.illinois.edu/HealthyHabitsTips)

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## 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](https://go.illinois.edu/askthemastergardener).

*We're here to help with your gardening questions!*



## Become a Master Gardener This Fall!



### Fall Hybrid Master Gardener Training Sept 9 - Nov 25

Do you love gardening and want to make a difference in your community? Join the Fall 2025 Hybrid Master Gardener Training and turn your passion into purpose!

This training is open to adult volunteers in Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark counties who are eager to learn and share research-based gardening knowledge. Participants receive expert instruction from Illinois Extension horticulture educators on topics like soils, botany, vegetables, insects, trees, and more—all while preparing to serve in meaningful, hands-on horticulture projects across the region.

The hybrid format combines weekly online learning and live Zoom sessions with two in-person workshops at the Extension office in Milan. Training runs Tuesdays, September 9 through November 25, with a break the week of November 18. The cost is \$225 and includes a comprehensive horticulture textbook. Two scholarships are available to cover the tuition. See link below to apply.

Upon completion, Master Gardener trainees begin their volunteer internship—helping grow healthier communities one garden at a time.

#### Apply now and grow with us this fall!

Fill out the MG Training interest form at

[go.illinois.edu/MGHybridTraining](https://go.illinois.edu/MGHybridTraining)

Scholarship link: [form.jotform.com/213124288333148](https://form.jotform.com/213124288333148)

For more information, contact Tracy Jo Mulliken at [tmully@illinois.edu](mailto:tmully@illinois.edu) or call (309) 756-9978.

## Fall Harvest of Horticulture: Pollinator Wisdom & Seasonal Gardening Tips Thursday, September 18 | 5:30 - 7:30 pm Aleo Fire Station

Gardeners, mark your calendars! Join our Mercer County Master Gardeners for an inspiring evening of learning and connection at the Fall Harvest of Horticulture! Enjoy two engaging presentations from University of Illinois Extension horticulture educators:



### Native Pollinators

*Presented by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle*

Pollination isn't just for honey bees! Learn about the many native insects that play essential roles in pollination and how to create a landscape that welcomes and supports them.



### Behind the Bloom: Seasonal Garden Tasks for Year-Round Success

*Presented by Emily Swihart*

Great gardens don't just happen—they're supported by smart, timely tasks all year long. Emily will walk you through seasonal care tips that answer common landscape questions like when to plant trees, repot houseplants, and fertilize lawns.

This event offers expert advice, practical takeaways, and the chance to connect with fellow garden lovers. Cost is \$10. Appetizers will be served.

#### Don't miss this fun and informative evening!

Register at [go.illinois.edu/FallHarvestHort](https://go.illinois.edu/FallHarvestHort) or call Illinois Extension at (309) 756-9978.

# Join us for these Webinars & Classes

## Inflation: How it Affects a Fixed-Income Budget | August 12, 2 pm Webinar



Have you visited the grocery store recently and noticed that an item you regularly purchase is more expensive than usual? According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, inflation happens when goods and services prices increase over time. In this session, we will dive deeper into what inflation is and how it affects our buying power, how we can adjust our budget with increasing prices, and provide resources to better understand the effects of inflation in our everyday lives.

Register at [go.illinois.edu/lessonsforliving](https://go.illinois.edu/lessonsforliving)

## Gluten-Free Sourdough Bread & Jam Making Workshop Thurs. Aug 14, 1 - 3 pm Illinois Extension, Milan



Explore the tasty world of fermentation and preservation in this hands-on workshop led by Kristin Bogdonas, nutrition and wellness educator! Learn how to make gluten-free sourdough bread from scratch and tips for keeping your starter happy and healthy. Then, roll up your sleeves to create a jar of homemade jam to take home. Perfect for beginners and food lovers alike, this workshop blends tangy and sweet into one delicious experience. When it comes to flavor, there's nothing better than homemade!

Cost: \$10/person or couple (one jar of jam per person/couple). Sign up at [go.illinois.edu/GFSourdoughJam](https://go.illinois.edu/GFSourdoughJam) or call (309) 756-9978.

## Crop Rotation: Building Resilient Gardens August 19, 1:30 pm Webinar



Learn how crop rotation can improve a garden's soil health, reduce pests and diseases, and even boost overall productivity. This presentation will cover techniques for rotating plant families, even in small spaces like raised beds or containers. Discover how to plan a garden for long-term success with crop rotation.

Presenter: Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle

Register at [go.illinois.edu/fourseasonsgardening](https://go.illinois.edu/fourseasonsgardening)



Bring your family for a fun day exploring agriculture, horticulture, and healthy living with Illinois Extension at Farm in the Park on Tues., August 5.

Join us from 11 am - 1 pm at Veteran's Park in Galva (across from our office) for these fun activities:

- Free Petting Zoo
- Kids Crafts & Activity Stations
- Interactive Games & Prizes
- Dive into Health, Wellness, Horticulture, & Agriculture Resources from Illinois Extension.

**Come for lunch:** Buy a hot dog, chips, applesauce, cookie, and drink for \$5.

**We look forward to seeing you there!**

# Leaf it to the Library:

## Learning Sessions with a Plant Expert

Join University of Illinois Extension Horticulture Educator Emily Swihart for a fun and informative session designed to grow your gardening knowledge. Whether you're a beginner or seasoned gardener, you'll walk away inspired and ready to dig in!

*There is no cost to attend, but registration is required.*

**Register at: [go.illinois.edu/LibraryPlantsProgram](https://go.illinois.edu/LibraryPlantsProgram)**

or call Illinois Extension at (309) 756-9978 to register.



### Library Program Schedules:

#### **Wed, September 10 – Edwards River Library, Aledo**

- 10:00 AM – Seed Starting 101
- 1:00 PM – Container Gardening Made Easy

#### **Wed, September 17 – Robert Jones Library, Coal Valley**

- 10:00 AM – Planting, Pruning, & Tree Care for Everyone
- 1:00 PM – Flowers in the Home Garden

#### **Thurs, September 18 – Silvis Public Library**

- 10:00 AM – What is with Native Cultivars?
- 1:00 PM – Seed Starting 101

#### **Mon, September 29 – Cambridge Public Library**

- 10:00 AM – Seed Starting 101
- 1:00 PM – Planting, Pruning, & Tree Care for Everyone

#### **Wed, October 1 – Colona Library**

- 10:00 AM – Flowers in the Home Garden
- 1:00 PM – Planting, Pruning, & Tree Care for Everyone

#### **Thurs, October 2 – Galva Public Library**

- 10:00 AM – Trees and Natural Disasters
- 1:00 PM – Container Gardening Made Easy

#### **Thurs. October 16 – East Moline Library**

- 10:00 AM – Seed Starting 101
- 1:00 PM – Container Gardening Made Easy

### Class Descriptions:



**Planting, Pruning, and Tree Care for Everyone** This program guides attendees through the foundational yet essential steps of planting and caring for young trees. Attendees will gain practical knowledge to support healthy tree growth, prevent future damage, and foster long-term resilience.



**Flowers in the Home Garden** Discover the joy of homegrown bouquets. During this program, participants will learn how to cultivate a beautiful cut flower garden and leave knowing how to select, plant, and care for species that combine to make a stunning bouquet.



**What is with Native Cultivars?** The presentation will discuss emerging research that highlights the nuanced relationships between native plant species, cultivars of those plants, and native pollinators. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between native plants and pollinators, and how this knowledge can inform their choices at the garden center.



**Seed Starting 101** This beginner-friendly program covers the essential steps of successfully starting seeds at home. Gain a better understanding of how to select the right containers and soil, time your sowing based on species, understand light management, and troubleshoot common challenges so participants leave with confidence in their ability to start seeds indoors.



**Trees and Natural Disasters** This presentation explores how Midwestern natural disasters affect tree health, structure, and survival. Learn practical strategies to prepare trees before a disaster occurs, mitigate damage during events, and support recovery in the aftermath.



**Container Gardening Made Easy** This engaging program introduces participants to the fundamentals of container gardening. From choosing the right soil and containers to maintenance practices, participants will leave ready to garden with or without a yard.

### Seedless Secrets for Success: Workplace Productivity

Boosting productivity doesn't always mean working harder; it means working smarter. Start by prioritizing tasks using the 80/20 rule: 80% of the results often come from 20% of the efforts. Focus on high-impact work first and break larger tasks into manageable steps.

Time blocking is another powerful strategy; assign specific periods in a calendar to focus on a single task. This reduces multitasking and helps maintain momentum. Minimize distractions by silencing non-essential notifications and setting clear "do not disturb" times.

Take short breaks, try a quick walk, or drink water, maybe even watermelon juice. These breaks improve focus and reduce burnout.

Stay organized with a simple system, like the two-minute rule: If something takes less than two minutes, do it immediately. Otherwise, schedule or delegate it.

Lastly, communicate clearly. Misunderstandings waste time, confirm next steps in writing, and don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions.

Remember, productivity isn't about doing more; it's about doing what matters most, efficiently and well.

Resource: Vaccaro, Pamela J. "The 80/20 Rule of Time Management." Family Practice Management 7, No. 8 (September 2000): 76-76.

### Watermelon Time – Tips for Picking and Storing This Juicy Fruit



August 3 is National Watermelon Day. It's a great time to enjoy this sweet and juicy fruit. Here are some easy tips for picking a good watermelon and keeping it fresh longer:

- Pick the right one: Look for a watermelon with no soft or dark spots. Check the spot where it sat on the ground; it should be golden yellow. That means it's ripe and ready to eat.
- Wash before cutting: Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds. Then rinse the watermelon and scrub it with a produce brush. This helps remove any dirt or germs before cutting into it.
- Store it safely: A whole watermelon can stay fresh for up to two weeks if stored in a cool, dry place between 45 and 50 F. Once cut, store it in the fridge and eat it within four days.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### SUMMER WATERMELON SALAD

Yield: 4 servings

Ingredients:

- 5 cups cubed watermelon
  - 1.5 cups diced English cucumber
  - 6 fresh mint leaves, torn
  - 6 fresh basil leaves, torn
  - ¼ cup crumbled feta cheese, optional
  - 1 tablespoon of honey
  - 1 tablespoon lime juice
  - 2 teaspoons olive oil
  - Pinch of salt
- Vinaigrette:

Directions:

1. Wash hands. Mix honey, lime juice, and salt in a small bowl, then drizzle in olive oil while whisking. Set aside.
2. In a large bowl, combine watermelon and cucumber.
3. Wash and dry basil and mint leaves. Tear basil and mint leaves into the large bowl of watermelon and cucumber.
4. Top the watermelon salad with honey vinaigrette and gently toss to combine. Top with feta cheese and serve.

Nutrition information per serving with feta: 120 calories; 3 g protein; 4.5 g total fat (saturated fat 2 g); 20 g carbohydrate; 1 g dietary fiber; 160 mg sodium.