



VOL 3 ISSUE 1• February 2026

ILLINOIS

GREEN CONNECTIONS

Extension Master Volunteers Newsletter
Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties

Winter

by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle , Horticulture Educator

As we step into 2026, winter offers a quiet reminder that our landscapes are alive even in their stillness. The silhouettes of native grasses, the bright stems of Red Osier dogwood, and seed filled flower heads provide both beauty and vital habitat for birds and overwintering insects. While the landscape rests, it's the perfect season to dream, plan, and prepare for the year ahead. We are looking forward to programs in 2026 that will offer new opportunities to learn, explore, and bring conservation-minded practices home. For now, we can enjoy winter's quiet charm while looking forward to the vibrant growth that spring will bring.



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Celebrate National Popcorn Day with locally grown Illinois popcorn

by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle, ILRiverHort Blog

Popcorn is one of those simple joys that connects agriculture with snacking.

Mason County, Illinois, has long been recognized as a top popcorn grower. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, Mason County reported 18,552 acres of popcorn in 2012 and continues to be cited as the top popcorn-producing county in the United States. The Weaver Popcorn plant in Forest City supplies popcorn to more than 90 countries worldwide.

[READ MORE](#)



Choosing the Right Feeder and Seed for Winter Birds

by Jennifer Bass, EMG, EMN and C@H [ILRiverHort Blog](#)

Curious about the best feeders, seeds, and winter care practices for backyard birds? Winter is a wonderful time to slow down and enjoy the birds that brighten our backyards. Jennifer Bass offers a guide to supporting a variety of birds through the cold months.

[READ MORE](#)

“Through the years, I have become more committed to caring for the birds and wildlife in my yard.”

Jennifer Bass



Gardeners' BIG Day

Join us on March 14, 2026 for Gardeners' BIG Day. It's shaping up to be morning of learning, creativity, and fun. Whether you're a backyard grower, a nature enthusiast, or simply curious about new gardening ideas, this event offers a rich mix of educational sessions, hands-on workshops, vendors, and door prizes. Sessions cover a variety of topics including wildlife-friendly yards, spring ephemerals, soil science, botanical art, and more. Space is limited and workshops fill quickly, so now is the perfect time to explore the full schedule and register. Visit the event page for complete details and session descriptions.

[Register](#)



Illinois Green Connections 2026

Illinois Green Connections invites you to a new year of learning opportunities in 2026. Each gathering offers a way to explore the natural world. This year's topics include uncovering the stories behind presidential gardens in Seeds of a Nation, touring the Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery, diving into the hidden networks of mycelium, discovering how cover crops can strengthen your home garden, and finally celebrating the season together at our festive End of the Year Brunch. These events are designed for Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, Conservation@Home members, and anyone who loves learning about Illinois' landscapes. Explore the full schedule and register for your favorites on the Illinois Extension events website.

[Register](#)

2026 Illinois Green Connections Schedule

March 5 at 1 pm: [Seeds of a Nation](#) at Morton Public Library, Morton

May 5 at 10 am: [Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery Tour](#), Topeka

July 9 at 5:30 pm [Mycelium](#) at Lillie M Evans Library, Princeville

September 15 at 5:30 pm, [Cover Crops for the Home](#) at Parlin-Ingersoll Library, Canton

December 11 at 10 am, [End of the Year Brunch](#), Tazewell County Health Department, Tremont





Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop

Learn the art and science of fruit tree pruning with Kurt Christ of Christ Orchard in this hands-on workshop designed for gardeners of all experience levels. Participants will learn why, when, and how to prune fruit trees to improve structure, health, and fruit production. Practice techniques in the field with guidance from a knowledgeable instructor. Bring your questions and your curiosity, and leave feeling confident caring for your fruit trees for seasons to come.

Tuesday, February 17, 2026 - 1 to 3:30pm
Christ Orchard, 4317 Texas Rd, Elmwood, IL 61529

[Register](#)



New Resource Library

We are excited to announce a new Resource Library for Master Volunteers. Join us on **February 20 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.** at the Illinois Extension office in Fulton County for a first look at this new library space. This growing collection offers books and materials across a wide range of gardening and natural resources topics. The books from the Seeds of a Nation book study list are ready for those looking to deepen their historical, horticultural understanding, and environmental impact presidents and first ladies have had in the 250 years of our nation. Volunteers can browse on-site or check out items to support their projects, programs, and personal learning. The library also includes resources for building or enhancing seed libraries, plus ready-to-use educational kits that can enrich community programs and outreach. It's a welcoming space designed to inspire curiosity, spark ideas, and strengthen the work you do across our counties.

Contact Local Extension Office

Phone

Fulton 309-547-3711
Mason 309-543-3308
Peoria 309-685-3140
Tazewell 309-347-6614





Conservation@Home Evaluator Team

Master Volunteers who are looking to join the Conservation@Home Evaluator Team can join us to learn more about this volunteer opportunity.

Master Volunteers can help their community become part of a conservation movement! Join our Conservation@Home Evaluator training and learn how to assess yards for native gardening, habitat, and sustainability. Use your expertise to guide others in making meaningful environmental impacts. As a certified evaluator, you'll play a vital role in building greener, more resilient communities through the Conservation@Home program.

Thursday, February 12 at 1 pm, online, Zoom

[ZOOM LINK](#)

Thursday, February 19 at 5:30 pm
Illinois Extension 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin



Grow-A-Row Garden Network

The Grow-A-Row Garden Network is kicking off the 2026 season with a goal of donating 22,000 pounds of fresh produce to support food pantries and community distribution efforts across Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties.

Gardeners are encouraged to share surplus harvests for donation, with drop-off available at TCHD, University of Illinois Extension, or OSF Garden of Hope.

Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, and Conservation@Home members who register early will receive a FREE Garden Kit with six cool-season plants and three seed packets. Kits can be picked up at Gardeners' BIG Day on March 14 or the following week. Grow with purpose and help make a meaningful impact this season.

[Sign Up](#)

Grow a Row

Two ways to sign up

[Click Here to
Fill out online form](#)

[Send email to
growarow@tchd.net](mailto:growarow@tchd.net)





2026 Master Naturalist Continuing Education Kickoff

Join us for our first Master Naturalist meeting of the year on **Sunday, February 15, from 2–4 PM** at the Illinois Extension office 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin. We'll explore ways to support bird populations through central Illinois winters, share upcoming volunteer opportunities, and have time for you to bring your own announcements or projects. You'll also get a look at this year's meeting schedule and ways to help host or lead future sessions. Please register at go.illinois.edu/mnfeb26. It's a relaxed, welcoming way to reconnect, learn something new, and start the year together.

[Register](#)



Winter Tree ID Hike

Friday, February 27, 2026 - 10am to Noon
Forest Park Nature Center
5809 N Forest Park Dr, Peoria Heights

We will start indoors and review key things to look for when identifying trees, followed by a gentle hike on a trail to put that knowledge into practice. Bring your notebooks, pen, and dress for the weather. We will start our journey indoors. For more questions, email Brittany Chambers at blc21@illinois.edu.

Mark your Calendars for
Extension Master Naturalist
2026 Continuing Education

February 15
April 15
June 15
August 15
September 15
October 15
November 15



Upcoming Events

Mark your calendar

- **February 7, 9 am to 4 pm, Fulton/Mason Eagle Day** Dickson Mounds Museum 0956 N Dickson Mounds Rd, Lewistown
- **February 10 at 1:30 pm: Creating Simply Lovely Nature Art**, Four Seasons Webinar, [Register](#)
- **February 10, 5:30 pm, Conservation@Home Winter Sowing Workshop**, 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria
- **February 12 at 1 pm, Conservation@Home Evaluator Training**, [online](#)
- **February 15, 2 pm, Helping Birds Through the Winter**, 1505 Valle Vista Blvd [Register by February 14](#)
- **February 17 at 1 pm, Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop** Christ Orchard, 4317 Texas Rd, Elmwood. [Register by February 14](#)
- **February 19 at 5:30 pm, Conservation@Home Evaluator Training** 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **February 20, 9 am to 4 pm, Resource Library Opening**, 15411 IL-100, Lewistown
- **February 24, 4 pm, Invasives**, 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria
- **February 27, 10 am, Winter Tree ID Hike**, Forest Park Nature Center 5809 N Forest Park Dr, Peoria Heights
- **March 3 at 1:30 pm Pruning Young Shade Trees** Four Seasons Webinar, [Register](#)
- **March 5, 1 pm, Seeds of a Nation**, Morton Public Library, 315 W Pershing St, Morton. [Register](#)
- **March 14 from 8 am to 1 pm: Gardeners' BIG Day**, Cuba High School. 20325 N State Rte 97, Cuba. [Register by March 6](#)
- **March 19 at 1 pm. Wily and Wild Animal Invaders in Illinois**, Everyday Environment webinar. [Register](#)
- **March 23, 5:30 pm, Down River Farm with Evan Barry**, 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **March 24, 3 pm, Herbs for Body Care with Janine Donahue**, 1505 Valle Vista Blvd. Pekin
- **March 25, 4 pm, Spring Ephemerals**, Luthy Botanical Garden, 2520 N Prospect Rd, Peoria
- **April 20, 9 am, Clean Water Celebration**, 201 SW Jefferson Ave, Peoria
- **April 22, 4 pm, New Zealand's Flora And Fauna**, 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria
- **May 5 at 10 am, Illinois Green Connections Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery Tour**, 25410 Fish Hatchery Rd, Topeka. [Register by May 4](#)
- **May 9, 8 am to noon, Plant Sale**. Metro Center, 4700 N University St, Peoria

Details

Check online for more information about upcoming events

- [Illinois Extension FMPT Events](#)
- [U of I Extension ILRiverHort Facebook Page](#)



Volunteer Opportunities

- **Pekin Giving Garden:** [Julie Dantone](#)
- **Morton Giving Garden:** [Pam Scott](#), Monday & Thursday am.
- **Tazewell County Health Department Garden:** [Trudy Yazujian](#), Tuesday & Friday, 8 am - noon.
- **Canton Giving Garden:** [Gayle Blodgett](#)
- **4-H Learning Garden:** [May Bach](#), Tuesday & Thursday 9 - 11 am.
- **Holy Family Church's St. Fiacre Gardens:** [Bob Reading](#), Wednesday & Saturday, 9 am - noon.
- **Rt 150 Garden:** [Polly Wagner](#), Tuesday from 7 - 9 am.
- **Kim St John Butterfly Habitat:** [Randy Huber](#) and [Louise Bassett](#), Wednesday from 8:30 - 11:30 am.
- **ICC Demonstration Garden:** [Jennifer Bass](#), Tuesday 9 - 11:30 am.
- **Morton Public Library:** [Janine Donahue](#) and [Sarah Smith](#)
- **Jubilee Butterfly Garden:** [Patricia Melaik](#), Thursday 9 - noon.
- **St. Anne's Garden of Hope:** [Mike Brooks](#), Please sign up on our [website](#).
- **Peoria Academy's Vegetable Garden:** [Laura Hertz](#), Wednesday 9 - 11 am.
- **Peoria Zoo Pollinator Garden:** [May Bach](#), Tuesday &/or Wednesday am.
- **Friendship House:** [Kendra Belk](#)
- **Spring Creek Work Days:** [Mike McGraw](#), 2nd Wednesday of the month.
- **Elwood Work Days:** [Ed Coleman](#), 3rd Sunday & 3rd Wednesday of each month, 9 am - noon.
- **Donovan Park workday:** [David Pittman](#),
- **Rocky Glen Work Days:** [David Pittman](#)
- **Gardening Helpline:** [Anne Blindt](#) or [Debbie Lane](#)
- **Conservation@Home Evaluator:** [Ellen Denler](#) or [Karen Weigelt](#)
- **Speaker's Bureau:** [Ainsley Olsen](#) and [Fran Stroemer](#)
- **Newsletters:** [Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle](#) and [Jennifer Bass](#)

Celebrating Hot Chocolate Day

by [Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle](#), ILRiverHort Blog

While hot chocolate feels like a simple winter comfort, its story includes an array of flavorful plants starting with chocolate and adding herbs and spices. Hot cocoa and hot chocolate are terms that we often use interchangeably. Technically, hot cocoa and hot chocolate are different because the form of chocolate used in their preparation differs. Hot cocoa is made with cocoa powder. Hot chocolate is made from melting chocolate bars into cream or your favorite milk.

[READ MORE](#)

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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 attend, call 309-347-6614. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the US Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.

Work Days

Check with project lead about specific dates, work days can change due to conflicts and weather issues.



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