

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

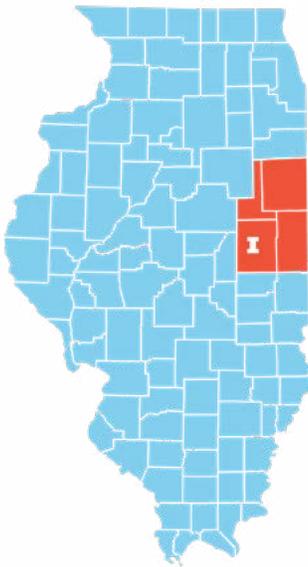


Serving Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Ginger Boas
County Director



Renewing Our Commitment to Educating the Communities We Serve

This past year, the University of Illinois Extension programs in our counties continued to focus on what matters most—supporting healthy people, caring for our natural resources, and strengthening our communities through practical, research-based education.

From youth development through 4-H and outdoor learning, to hands-on programs centered on food, nutrition, and wellness, to opportunities that deepen understanding of our local environment, Extension connected residents of all ages with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive. Whether learning about pollinators, preserving food, improving brain health, or exploring local parks and gardens, participants engaged in programs grounded in real-world applications and community connections.

These stories reflect our commitment to cultivating knowledge that supports lifelong learning, environmental stewardship, and overall well-being. We are grateful to our volunteers, partners, and participants who make this work possible and help ensure that Extension remains a trusted resource for our county.

Ginger Boas
County Director

Cover photo: A Dickcissel bird on a Compass Plant at the Sangamon River Forest Preserve. Photo by Master Naturalist Paul Thomasen.

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension 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

2025 Engagement

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

738 Communities Served	831K+ Program Attendees	9.4M+ Webpage Views	9.8M+ Social Media Visibility	1.8M+ YouTube Impressions
249 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	83 Online Courses Accessed by 13K+ People	10,846 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,848 4-H Clubs 20,242 4-H Club Members	68,697 Fair Exhibits 295,379 4-H Experiences

Partnerships

Resource Generation

5,129 Program Volunteers	277 Community Gardens	2,830 School and Community Partners	\$15,026,392 Value of Volunteer Contributions	\$499,188 Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated	\$960K+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners
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On July 4, 2025, the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act eliminated all funding for Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed nutrition education program. Here's the impact by the numbers:

Up to \$135M Estimated Annual Loss in Future Economic Returns on Investment in Illinois	2 million+ Residents Lost Access to Food and Health Education	1,754 Partners Including Schools, Food Banks, Early Childhood Centers, Public Health Departments, and Local Agencies Impacted	200+ Staff Members Affected by Layoffs	30 Years of Infrastructure and Network Building for the SNAP-Ed Program Lost
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Celebrating second annual Extension Day success

Local partnerships are an important part of the work Illinois Extension does. This past May, Extension partnered with the Champaign Park District for the second Extension Day at the Douglass Community Center and Annex in Champaign. This free, family-friendly event was developed to connect residents with valuable local resources and to celebrate community. The turnout for this event was great. Attendance for the cooking class was jam-packed, more than 100 people attended this community event.

Attendants could connect with representatives from all Extension program areas: 4-H, Family Life, Nutrition and Wellness, Finance, SNAP-Ed, Integrated Health Disparities, Master Gardeners, and Master Naturalists. In addition to being able to connect with Extension staff, attendants could connect with more than 30 community partners. Some of the community partners who joined Extension for this exciting event included the Champaign Park District, the Housing Authority of Champaign County, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, OSF Healthcare, and the Trauma and Resilience Initiative. There were several new partners to this year's Extension Day, including Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, who handed out large produce boxes to attending families.

Extension Day is all about making connections. We want people to know that these programs and services are here for them—whether it's support for families, tips for healthy living, or just a fun afternoon out. Everyone is welcome.
Tracy Bowden, SNAP-Ed educator



(left to right) Master Gardener Barbara Ahrens, Master Gardener Tom Ward, and Master Gardener Intern Yuquin Lin represent Master Gardeners at Extension Day.

To encourage families, couples, and individuals to attend this event, various fun, family-friendly activities were also offered to the public. Such offerings included face painting, a bounce house, cooking demonstrations, fresh produce from The Veggie Van, cotton candy, Kona Ice, and food for purchase from the Chicago Grill food truck.



A young Extension Day attendant takes part in face painting services from Kari's Occasions.



Families at Extension Day work together to create a healthy meal.

Extension Day Health Assessment

As part of Extension’s commitment to advancing health equity and addressing community-identified needs, a community-based needs assessment was conducted on Extension Day with approximately 50 participants to better understand barriers impacting Black maternal health and urban access to medical care. Surveys were completed voluntarily and anonymously to support open feedback and ensure reliable data collection.

Extension staff collected participant data using a 10-question survey related to:

- Access to healthcare services, including availability, affordability, and continuity of care.
- Trust in healthcare providers and medical teams, particularly during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum periods.
- Social determinants of health (SDOH): such as transportation, insurance coverage, social support, and access to culturally responsive care.

The results from this survey reported limited access to culturally responsive maternal health education and services. A notable portion of respondents expressed reduced trust in healthcare providers and medical systems, often linked to prior negative experiences and perceived bias. On the topic of social determinants of health, particularly insurance coverage, transportation barriers, and lack of community-based maternal supports, were identified as factors limiting access to timely and quality care.

The strategic goals and next steps from this assessment include strengthening partnerships with community organizations, healthcare providers, and advocacy groups, and guiding future Extension efforts aimed at addressing health disparities and improving maternal health outcomes through culturally responsive, community-driven approaches.

This needs assessment reinforces Extension’s role as a trusted community resource and highlights opportunities to address systemic gaps in healthcare, particularly Black maternal healthcare. Findings will be used to guide program planning, secure partnerships, and support data-informed decision-making to enhance health education, support, and equity within the community.

FCS team recognized for collaborative Double Feature series



This October, members of the Illinois Extension Family Life and Nutrition and Wellness team serving Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion counties were honored at the National Extension Association for Family and Consumer Sciences 90th annual session.

Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen, Family Life Educator Emily Harmon, and Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension Program Coordinator Vanessa Jones received the First Place Central Region NEAFCS Family Health and Wellness award at the conference held October 20 - 23 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In receiving the award, Mannen, Harmon, and Jones were recognized for their innovative Double Feature program.

The theme for the NEAFCS conference was “SPARK connections, innovations, communities, and growth.” This program combines Family Life and Nutrition education and has been offered across four counties. It results in improving community wellness, knowledge, and partnerships through engaging, data-driven, and sustainable initiatives.

- Wits Workout: Savor the Seasons and Drink Water, Live Better
- Cooking From Your Cabinet and Where to Start: Decluttering Your Home Finances
- Eating Well as You Age and Who Gets Grandma’s Yellow Plate

The NEAFCS Family Health and Wellness Award recognized innovative programs promoting and improving the health and wellness of families. The team’s dedication to educating through programs like Double Feature and their collaborative efforts in supporting this impactful program is evidence of just how essential their efforts are to the communities they serve.



(left to right) Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Program Coordinator Vanessa Jones, Family Life Educator Emily Harmon, and Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen at the Illinois Extension Annual Conference at the I Hotel and Conference Center.



Four generations, one fair: One man's lifelong dedication to the Iroquois County Fair

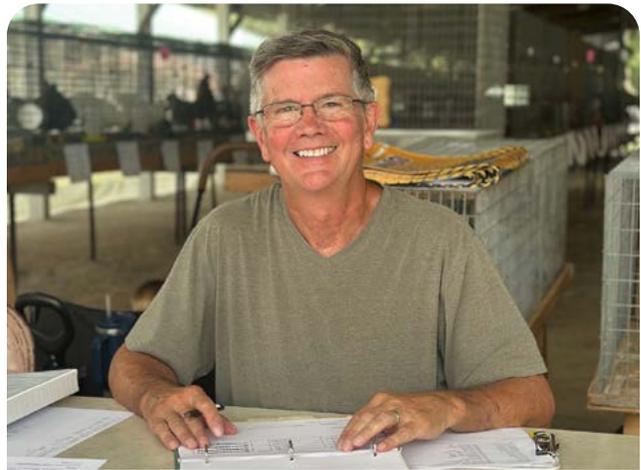
For Darrell Clatterbuck, the Iroquois County Fair isn't just an annual event — it's a family tradition stitched into the fabric of his life. For 30 years, he has served as the fair's rabbit superintendent, a role that blends hard work, patience, and a genuine love for teaching. Long before the gates open, Clatterbuck is in the rabbit barn, checking cages, arranging pens, and getting ready to present his "rabbit college," a presentation he does every year that helps kids understand not just how to win a ribbon, but how to care for their animals with pride.

"Having someone like Darrell guiding our kids is truly a gift," says 4-H Extension Program Coordinator Sara Seyfert. "He leads his program with dedication, always putting the growth and success of youth first."

Darrell's roots at the fair run deep; he and his wife's families have been involved for four generations. That dedication has been passed down to his children, who now travel back to Illinois each summer just to be part of fair week. "It's something we've always done together," says his daughter Shana, who travels from Warsaw, Indiana, to the fair each year. "The fair is part of who we are."

This year brought an extra reason to celebrate. Alongside the bustle of the barns and the familiar family traditions, Darrell watched with pride as his niece, Rae Stucki, was crowned the 2025 Iroquois County Fair Queen, carrying on the family's connection to the fair.

At the opening weekend of the Illinois State Fair, Darrell was inducted into the 4-H Hall of Fame. For Darrell, the fair is more than an event on the calendar — it's a legacy. As he leans on the railing of the rabbit show ring, watching the next generation of exhibitors take their turns, he's reminded why he keeps coming back year after year. "The fair teaches responsibility, it teaches confidence, and it brings people together," he says. "If we can keep passing that on, then we're doing something right."



4-H fair rabbit judge, Darrell Clatterbuck, in the Rabbit Barn at the Iroquois County Fair.



Darrell Clatterbuck and his wife at the 4-H Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony.



91
4-H Clubs in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties



1,225
Club memberships in Champaign Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties



71
Adult 4-H Volunteers



Connecting with aspiring 4-H youth

In June, Illinois Extension welcomed 46 young participants from Ford and Iroquois counties to the annual Cloverbud Camp, held at the Ford-Iroquois Extension Office in Onarga. Designed for youth ages 5–7, this camp introduced Cloverbuds to the wide range of hands-on learning experiences available through 4-H.

Campers rotated through seven interactive stations throughout the day, each representing a different 4-H project area. Youth completed individual take-home projects while exploring topics like beef cattle, horticulture, scrapbooking, and rocket building. These hands-on activities helped campers better understand where their food comes from, how plants grow, and the basics of science and design.

The camp also provided an important social component, allowing Cloverbuds to build new friendships with peers from across the two counties. For many, this was their first introduction to the broader 4-H community.

This day was especially impactful because it was planned and led entirely by the Ford-Iroquois Emerging Leaders—a youth leadership group open to 4-H members in seventh grade and above. These older youth designed the learning stations, guided campers through activities, and served as positive role models.

“Cloverbud Camp gave me a chance to reflect on my experiences in 4-H and pass down information and activities to Cloverbuds who are eager to start their journey,” says 4-H alum Reka Ritzma. “Many kids don’t know where their food comes from or even what cows eat. Being able to answer those questions was really fulfilling.”



Learn more about 4-H
go.illinois.edu/cfiv4H

Cloverbud campers practice expressing creativity and taking photos in the scrapbooking portion of Cloverbud Camp.

As a Milks Grove Challengers 4-H member and Emerging Leader, Maya Anderson adds, “It was rewarding to see kids engaging in the activities and constantly asking questions. I hope this experience gives them the confidence to try different projects when they can show at the fair.”

This year’s Cloverbud Camp cultivated curiosity, leadership, and lifelong learning among youth of all ages. By empowering teen leaders to guide younger participants, the program builds intergenerational connections and inspires the next generation of 4-H members to explore, grow, and thrive.

Many kids don’t know where their food comes from or even what cows eat. Being able to answer those questions was really fulfilling.
Reka Ritzma, 4-H Iroquois County Alum



2025 Cloverbud Camp participants in Onarga.



Connecting families with canning and breadmaking

Modern homesteading has become increasingly popular over the past several years. In response to this increasing demand, Illinois Extension Nutrition and Wellness Educator and Registered Dietitian Rachel Mannen developed and implemented a series of canning and breadmaking workshops. Canning and breadmaking workshops were conveniently held at various locations in Champaign and Vermilion Counties, located at local libraries and the Illinois Nutrition Education Programs kitchen.

Among the six canning workshops held this year was a summer workshop series of three workshops where participants learned how to safely preserve fresh produce and enjoy their homemade jam, relish, and or salsa. Each session of this series drew a full crowd eager to learn about food preservation. Some participants enrolled in a workshop, or multiple workshops, with a friend or family member, which seemed to increase their excitement by having someone to share the canning experience with.

In addition to the interest in traditional cooking skills, these workshops were also built upon the desire in the community for improving one's eating habits. They informed participants about the benefits of eating less processed foods, which are easier to digest and allow for locally sourced or homegrown produce to be used, effectively providing the homesteading skills that are increasingly sought after over the last several years.

In both canning and breadmaking themed events, participants discussed how excited they were for the knowledge and skills the workshop would provide them and were looking forward to recreating the recipes they learned with their families.

The success of these workshops emphasizes the increasing demand for educational and sustainable programming in communities. By providing these informative, fulfilling workshops, Illinois Extension helps individuals grow and share their skills with friends and families, which can be passed down through generations.



Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen (center) with her mother Cathy Mannen (left) and grandmother Renee Wamsley (right) at the Fall Learn to Can workshop at the INEP kitchen.

Generational cooking is a pillar of workshops like this.

Rachel Mannen, Extension nutrition and wellness educator



Learn more about our nutrition and wellness program
go.illinois.edu/CFIV-Nutrition



Nourishing the community

It is without a doubt that the significant changes to the SNAP-Ed program have been felt by many in the state of Illinois. That impact has not gone unnoticed and is reflected in the SNAP-Ed team at Illinois Extension. SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden witnessed this impact firsthand and initiated the Holiday Food Drive in Champaign County this past November. This food drive was intended to encourage residents from Champaign County to support their community by donating food that would go to local food pantries.

For several weeks in November, staff of the Champaign County Extension office witnessed individuals bring in bags and bags of shelf-stable items for the Holiday Food Drive. Word of this food drive at a local Extension office spread amongst staff and to volunteers, leading to many local Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists who made numerous donations throughout November and helped spread the word. The Holiday Food Drive was launched to help feed families and individuals in need throughout Champaign County.

When initially planning this food drive, Bowden's goal was to raise enough awareness to have 100 pounds worth of donations. However, that original goal was significantly surpassed. Upon the final weigh-in, there was an astounding 697.2 pounds of goods donated by the community.

The SNAP-Ed team distributed goods the week of Thanksgiving, with the intention of having as many offerings as possible for those in need of food for Thanksgiving Day, and for many days after. Goods were donated to Head Start West, Head Start Urbana, Head Start Rantoul, St. Vincent DePaul Urbana, Wesley Parkland, and Community Service Center Northern Champaign County.

The distribution team was met with excitement and positive feedback for such substantial donations, especially with the addition of produce. A representative from St Vincent DePaul says they used to serve 50 patrons per day, and that has now doubled. The representative also says that they have been having a hard time keeping up with food, and the donation would surely help, especially during the holiday season.



SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden helps sort and prepare donated goods to be delivered to food pantries in Champaign County.

The turnout for this food drive has just been amazing. It's great to see the community come together and support each other during this challenging time.

Tracy Bowden, SNAP-Ed educator



Vermilion County older adults help guide local programming

This year, Vermilion County residents were invited to complete a brief survey as part of the Older Adult Project in Vermilion County. This project is a crucial initiative to improve the well-being of older adults in the community. The survey was designed to gather insights on how older adults access food, stay physically active, and maintain social connections. The survey was a collaborative effort between University of Illinois Extension, CRIS Healthy Aging, Carle at the Riverfront, and Sacred Heart Medical Center.

The first part of this project focused on collecting community input through a county-wide survey. More than 300 surveys were received as part of the Older Adult Project, which were completed anonymously online or in-person at events such as the 75th Annual Kiwanis Pancake and Sausage Day in Danville.



SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden shares information about the Vermilion County Older Adult Survey at the 75th Annual Kiwanis Pancake and Sausage Day event in Danville.

“This is an important opportunity to share your experiences and help us make positive changes in the county,” says SNAP-Ed Educator and survey coordinator Tracy Bowden. The results of the survey will be solely used for research and planning purposes for the next phase of the project.

In the next phase, the data will be analyzed, focusing on food access, physical activity, and social connectedness, to identify barriers and partner with local organizations to strengthen community supports. The information collected confidentially from the survey helped identify challenges faced and uncover opportunities for improving local programs and services. Through understanding these barriers to accessing essential resources, survey organizers can begin the next steps for improving the quality of life for older adults.



Learn more about SNAP-Ed
go.illinois.edu/CFIV-SNAP-Ed

Furthering education at the Regional Learning Institute

The Regional Learning Institute was held in August at the I Hotel and Conference Center and brought together 39 K-12 food service professionals from the region. This annual event is an ongoing collaborative effort designed to support school nutrition professionals by providing required continuing education credits while fostering professional growth, skill development, and the exchange of innovative ideas.

Presenters included SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Caitlin Mellendorf from a neighboring Extension unit, Andrea Gregory from the Illinois State Board of Education, and Fiona Monroe and Jenny Flowers from Farm to School.

Educational sessions focused on timely and practical topics relevant to school food service operations. Topics included Vegetarian Options in the Classroom, Incorporating Cultural Foods in the School Lunchroom, Farm to School programming, Illinois State Board of Education updates, and Food Taste Testing strategies. Presentations emphasized practical application, compliance with standards, and creative approaches to meeting student needs while supporting nutrition and wellness goals.

The Regional Learning Institute continues to serve as a valuable professional development opportunity for K-12 food service professionals. By bringing participants together annually, RLI strengthens regional connections, supports continuing education requirements, and promotes ongoing learning to enhance the quality and innovation of school nutrition programs.



Food service professionals gather for a presentation by Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen as part of the Regional Learning Institute at the I Hotel and Conference Center.



116

SNAP-Ed Partnerships in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties



3,602

Total Participants in SNAP-Ed Programs in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties





Improving mental health and wellness in the community

Brain health is a topic most don't concern themselves with until it seems like it is becoming an issue for them, or until the concern has manifested into a diagnosis one has to face. Unfortunately, sometimes these issues are faced alone and can lead to further related problems surrounding the diagnosis. Family Life Educator Emily Harmon has observed this need within the counties she serves, developed two programs to promote brain health education, and brought both workshop series back to the communities she serves.

The Brain Health – It's a No Brainer! series was developed to educate older adults on overall brain health, normal memory changes, and brain health contributors. This year, the series was brought to four locations within Champaign County: Villas of Holly Brook, the Landing at Legends, Mahomet Methodist Church, and Windsor of Savoy. The cumulative attendance included 87 participants.

The events at the retirement and assisted living facilities of Villas of Holly Brook and Windsor of Savoy each included a special presentation on the 10 Signs of Alzheimer's Disease from a representative of the Alzheimer's Association. Their presentation emphasized the importance of knowing the signs of this medical condition and of having a support system to rely on when going through the diagnosis process and beyond.

"The Brain Health program Extension discusses what could be considered 'normal' cognitive changes regarding recall speed and accuracy, different types of memory, what can contribute to cognitive decline, and what we do across the lifespan to contribute to our brain health," says Harmon.



Learn more about Family Life
go.illinois.edu/FamilyLife

Attendance for each session at all locations included inquisitive and engaging participants who asked good questions. Of the responses received from post-event surveys, results showed participants' knowledge of brain health topics to be very low, low, or medium, but after the session, participants' knowledge was high or very high. The results from the effectiveness of the sessions went beyond ranking their knowledge on the subject. Multiple participants commented on appreciating knowing they were not alone in their memory loss, and greatly appreciated that this series is offered. Participants additionally reported that after the sessions, they had more initiative to be more active and to be more social.



A representative from Alzheimer's Association presents the final session of Brain Health - It's a No Brainer! at the Windsor of Savoy.



7
Brain Health Programs Offered in 2025



87
Participants Across All Sessions



Sunshine walks and improving mobility

The season of spring brings new beginnings and renewed invigoration to get active, explore the budding plants, and enjoy a warmer spring sun. With this spring renewal, the Family Consumer Science team brought back their successful Tai Chi series and introduced Springtime Walks & Talks.

The new Springtime Walks & Talks series combined movement, education, and community connection at four local parks in Champaign-Urbana for an energizing mid-day break. For four weeks in May, each session consisted of an hour-long session with a wellness activity or lesson, followed by a guided walk on a paved trail. Regarding this series, event co-organizer and Family Life Educator Emily Harmon says, “This series is all about encouraging people to make time for their health, even in simple ways like walking. We want to create a space where wellness feels accessible, fun, and connected to the community.”

Also offered in the spring is Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention. This recurring series included 16 sessions, where participants learned 12 movements, and each session built upon the lessons learned in the previous sessions. While Springtime Walks & Talks is geared towards all ages, this tai chi series is an evidence-based program supported by Dr. Paul Lam’s research in helping alleviate arthritis pain and preventing falls in older adults. In addition to fall prevention, the goals of this program are to help build confidence within each participant, improve their overall health and wellness, and provide stronger or new social connections for participants.

This year’s tai chi sessions were held at Immanuel Manor and the Horizon Center. Participants at both locations reported gaining more confidence in themselves through the program. One participant specifically reported having memory issues and enjoyed practicing tai chi to help with their memory.

Together, Springtime Walks & Talks and Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention demonstrate Extension’s commitment to supporting lifelong wellness through movement, education, and connection. Whether participants were enjoying a walk in a local park or building strength through guided tai chi, both programs offered tangible ways to invest in physical health, mental well-being, and social connection.



Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen and Family Life Educator Emily Harmon pose with tai chi program participants at the Immanuel Lutheran Senior Residence.



Foraging a path to sustainability

Responding to growing community interest in foraging, Extension Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen and Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy Educator Karla Griesbaum collaborated to develop a comprehensive, interdisciplinary foraging course that connects people to nature, nutrition, and sustainable food systems. The program was intentionally designed to blend safe and ethical foraging practices with practical skills for handling, preparing, and cooking wild foods, while highlighting the nutritional and health benefits of a diverse diet.

Entitled “The Edible Wild Path,” the curriculum is divided into three parts. The first segment is classroom-style, where participants learn about the safety, handling, harvesting, and storage of wild foods, followed by an exploration of ethics, legality, and the detailed identification of easily accessible wild foods. The second portion of the course is a field trip to a partner-owned natural area, where participants hike, learn, and identify wild foods, along with their seasonal availability. The final portion of the course is a cooking class that includes the preparation and consumption of various recipes featuring some of the wild foods participants learned about during the previous two segments. Thanks to the deer donation program, venison was incorporated into some recipes to enhance the nutritional value of the meal and provide education on game meat.

This course aims to address multiple issues and needs facing Extension’s communities. The content and format align with the Extension’s strategic priority areas of community, environment, food and agriculture, and health. The course fosters community by providing an inclusive space for discovery and learning together about how to connect with food and one’s overall health, encompassing physical and mental well-being.

This course fosters a connection with the natural world that inspires a sense of responsibility, belonging, and stewardship of both public and private lands. Additionally, by reaching the current foraging community, participants gain knowledge in ethical gathering, further enhancing the protection of natural ecosystems.



Participants gather to learn about the do’s and don’ts of foraging from a local foraging expert.



120

Master Naturalist Volunteers



9,834

Master Naturalist Volunteer Hours



Learn more about our Master Naturalist program
go.illinois.edu/ECIMN



Local residents take on pollinator conservation



This spring and early summer, Illinois Extension led educational programs and outreach events across central Illinois to raise awareness about pollinators' importance and encourage residents to take action in their communities. Through hands-on workshops, family-friendly events, and citizen science projects, participants of all ages learned how pollinators support ecosystems, food systems, and biodiversity—and how small steps at home can contribute to larger conservation efforts.

The 2025 Champaign-Urbana Pollinator Quest wrapped up with strong community participation, resulting in hundreds of observations submitted throughout the weeklong event, which took place June 15–21 during National Pollinator Week. Participants documented more than 85 unique species of pollinators using the iNaturalist app, contributing valuable data to support conservation and biodiversity monitoring efforts. “Seeing so many people get outside and contribute to a greater understanding of our local pollinator populations is incredibly inspiring,” says Extension Educator Karla Griesbaum. “Each observation helps researchers track species trends and informs strategies for protecting these essential insects.”



Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau helps a young Pollinator Quest participant use the iNaturalist app.

Seeing so many people get outside and contribute to a greater understanding of our local pollinator populations is incredibly inspiring.

Karla Griesbaum, Environmental and Energy Stewardship educator

Organized by Illinois Extension, Pollinator Quest was part of a larger season of pollinator-focused programming designed to raise awareness, encourage conservation, and inspire action.



Find tips on ways to contribute to pollinator health
go.illinois.edu/PollinatorPocket

This season included:

- Nocturnal Pollinators, a family-friendly evening event exploring the often-overlooked role of moths, beetles, and other nighttime pollinators. Participants learned how to observe and identify nocturnal species and why their conservation is equally important.
- Building a Pollinator Garden, a hands-on workshop that guided participants through designing and planting a garden that attracts and supports pollinators using native plants. Attendees left with practical tips and plant recommendations tailored to Illinois' growing conditions.
- The Pollinator Pocket Program, an ongoing initiative from Illinois Extension that provides educational resources and signage for creating small-scale pollinator habitats in yards, schoolyards, parks, and other green spaces. Participants are encouraged to register their gardens and become part of a growing network of pollinator-friendly spaces across the state.

“One thing I loved about all of these programs was that they met people where they were —whether they were planting their first pollinator garden or discovering the hidden world of nighttime pollinators,” says Ryan Pankau, Illinois Extension horticulture educator. “Our goal is to provide practical tools and inspiring experiences that help individuals make a meaningful impact on pollinator health right in their backyards.”

Pollinators play a vital role in maintaining healthy ecosystems and food systems, but they are experiencing declines in many populations around the globe and right here in Illinois. Events with a pollinator focus aim to raise awareness while equipping individuals to take part in real-world conservation efforts.



Idea Garden in Urbana.

Nature enthusiasts connect through outdoor learning



Illinois Extension fostered environmental literacy and appreciation for natural resources through interpretive Tree Identification Walks at various locations around central Illinois this year. Led by Extension Educator Ryan Pankau, these guided walks helped participants identify both native and introduced tree species while learning practical tree care practices. “I am always amazed by the fascination people have for trees,” Pankau reflects. “However, many folks are not able to identify species in unfamiliar settings. Tree walks have been a fun and interactive way to boost recognition of these all-important, long-lived perennial plants.”

Pankau has regularly offered these programs year-round, collaborating with local partners, as well as Extension staff and volunteers, to provide this programming to the public. “Believe it or not, there are some fairly easy tricks for identification of trees in the wintertime, without leaves,” Pankau notes.

Beyond helping people learn interesting and informative tree facts to impress their friends and family, these programs play a crucial role in preserving and appreciating urban and natural forests. The ecosystem services provided by these plant communities are far-reaching and positively impact everyone’s lives.

“Plant blindness” refers to the human tendency to overlook the plants around us, resulting in less recognition of the valuable services these plants provide annually. Programs like Pankau’s tree walks help folks better communicate with their friends and family to build recognition, appreciation, and promotion of Illinois forest resources.

Pankau typically highlights this in his closing message to participants. “If people can leave our tree walks able to identify even just one more tree species, that is a win because if you don’t know a plant’s name, you are less likely to protect it, or plant more of it. Learn one more species at a tree walk is one more step in the right direction to cure plant blindness.”



Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau educates nature enthusiasts on tree care and more during a Tree Identification Walk.



Designing landscapes

Illinois Extension's Native Landscape Design Drawing Workshop taught residents how to make meaningful environmental changes in their own backyards. Through a two-part class led by Extension Educator Ryan Pankau and Master Gardener Coordinator Lucy Cross, participants gained a deeper understanding of the role native plants and pollinators play in healthy ecosystems while developing practical skills to design sustainable, site-specific garden spaces. By blending virtual instruction with hands-on, in-person design sessions, the program supported gardeners of all experience levels in transforming conservation principles into actionable, personalized landscape plans.

In part one of the class, participants learned about the importance of native plants to the ecosystem and the benefits of biodiversity. The class was introduced to the basics of ecological design as well as important considerations when designing for people. Native plants are vital to the survival of pollinators—animals, such as bees, which facilitate the moving of pollen within and between flowers—which form the basis of a healthy ecosystem. As homework, participants were tasked with identifying an area of their home landscape for redesign and measuring its dimensions. Participants would use these measurements during the workshop portion in the second part of class.

In part two, the class learned the basics of landscape drafting, with an introduction to drafting tools and how to use them, including an overview of working at scale. The presentation introduced the steps in the design process: draw a base plan at a defined scale, conduct a needs assessment, document site conditions, begin designing with bubble diagrams, work through design drafts on tracing paper, and transfer the final design to the plan. Finally, students learned how to draw and size plants correctly using landscape graphics.

Following the presentation, participants were provided with drafting tools and materials to use during the workshop to create an initial landscape design using pollinator-friendly plants. Students had access to brochures with lists of Illinois-native plants and their growing conditions, as well as the Pollinator Plant Selector Tool on the Pollinators website. Participants drew base plans at scale on 4 x 4 graph paper. Next, they worked through their initial concepts using bubble diagrams on tracing paper.



Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau (left) discusses native landscape designs with a program participant.





Discovering the magic of the Douglas Discovery Garden

The Douglas Discovery Garden continues to serve as a living classroom and vital food source, thanks to the dedication of Vermilion County Master Gardeners and community partners. In 2025, this collaborative effort demonstrated how gardening can nourish both people and places

Over the course of the growing season, volunteers produced more than 2,300 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables, directly helping alleviate food insecurity while encouraging healthier eating habits among neighborhood residents.

From January through May, Master Gardeners led hands-on gardening classes for middle and high school students at Kenneth D. Bailey Academy, covering topics such as soil health, seed starting, and pollinators. One memorable lesson brought honeybees into the classroom, as a local beekeeper and Master Gardener, Walter Deck, shared a live hive with students. Through a partnership with the academy's alternative education program, students also participated in gardening classes and field trips to two local greenhouses. Seeds started by students were later planted at DDG, reinforcing lessons about where food comes from and encouraging young people to try new foods.

Each winter, Extension Educator Ryan Pankau leads a hands-on pruning workshop in the DDG orchard for new and experienced Master Gardeners. Participants learn proper pruning techniques while helping assess the health of the trees, identifying any signs of disease or stress. This practical training contributes to a healthier orchard, ensuring stronger, more productive trees that yield a greater quantity of fruit for the community.



224

Master Gardener Volunteers



19,172

Master Gardener Volunteer Hours

A partnership between Danville Area Community College Adult Education, the Danville Area Correctional Facility, and DDG resulted in handcrafted donations delivered in April 2025, including a garden shed, benches, shelving units for vegetables residents could take home, a wishing well for the sensory garden, and a strawberry planter. DACC students also returned in the fall, when Professor Wendy Brown brought her class to DDG to assist with garden cleanup.

Master Gardeners shared their expertise in creative ways throughout the year. In July, Vermilion County Master Gardener Larry Betout propagated blackberry and raspberry bushes from cuttings and led a popular program, Berries with Larry, helping gardeners learn how to grow small fruits at home. Volunteers also expanded their own knowledge through a field trip to a food forest in Bloomington, gaining ideas for future community gardening efforts.

Through food production, education, partnerships, and community engagement, the Douglas Discovery Garden continues to cultivate education, connection, and service.



Vermilion County Master Gardener Julie Donnell helps clean up the Douglas Discovery Garden with her fellow Master Gardeners.



FrogWatch: A leaping success



In partnership with the Champaign County Forest Preserves, Illinois Extension brought community-based conservation efforts to the region through the National FrogWatch USA Community Science Program. Led by Extension Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy Educator Karla Griesbaum, the program encouraged residents of all ages to contribute to scientific research by monitoring frog and toad calls at local wetlands and by submitting data to a national database used by researchers to track ecosystem changes.

Frogs and toads are indicators of ecosystem health because of their sensitivity to the environment. By monitoring the presence of species at wetlands over time, scientists can make informed decisions about the surrounding environment as well as develop successful conservation plans. Frogs and toads are also an important part of Illinois Ecosystems - they are both predator and prey, feasting on and providing control of insect populations, as well as being food for other animals such as birds, snakes, foxes, and fish.

Illinois Extension and Champaign County Forest Preserves will offer at least two in-person training sessions every year, as well as ongoing virtual training. Participants must take training and complete two assessments: one on the general program procedures and one on identifying local frogs and toads by their specific calls.

The best part about this program is the accessibility. Program participants can choose any wetland in the East Central Illinois area to monitor, even if it is in their neighborhood or back yard. This gives members of the community a much broader opportunity to connect with nature and contribute to science without traveling too far from home. Youth can get involved too, if they have an adult who complete the training with them. It is a way for kids to get outside, become aware, and be involved in conservation from an early age.

The data gathered at monitoring sessions is sent to the National FrogWatch USA headquarters at the Akron Zoo in Ohio. Scientists gather data from all over the U.S. to watch for trends in ecosystem changes and then best develop conservation and management plans.





Youth engage in hands-on explorations

Illinois Extension encouraged youth environmental education through a six-week, hands-on nature exploration series led by Master Naturalist volunteers for children aged 8–13 in a 4-H SPIN (Special Interest) club.. Extension Educator Karla Griesbaum coordinated guided hikes at local parks and preserves, where these Junior Master Naturalists explored a wide range of natural science topics, including birds, geology, forests, plants, mammals, and dragonflies, while developing observation skills and cultivating curiosity about the outdoors.

Master Naturalists honed their interests and skills to develop a session for 4-H participants, teaching them about a specific area of ecology through hands-on experiences and by creating their own stories related to that subject. “I am always amazed at the skill and knowledge base of our Master Naturalist group. I am so lucky to be able to work with these talented folks to help spread knowledge to both youth and adults,” says Griesbaum.

Master Naturalist volunteers helped children learn how to identify bird species by sight and sound, while also surveying their habitats and migration patterns. They also explored Illinois mammals during a trip to a wildlife medical clinic, gaining hands-on insight into local wildlife care and conservation. During a geology lesson held in a state park, students studied the history of Illinois, examined local rocks and minerals, and learned about their significance to both humans and wildlife.

Participants investigated the fascinating world of dragonflies, observing their life cycle and identifying several species at a local wetland within Homer Lake Forest Preserve. Young learners eagerly waded into the water, discovering tadpoles, frogs, toads, and dragonfly larvae. At Collins Pond, they experienced the wonder of plants from a local botanist, even in the rain, while learning to appreciate their diversity and beauty.

On a hike through Busey Woods, students explore the ecology of trees and woodlands, gaining a deeper understanding of forest ecosystems and the important roles they play in the environment.

Students thrived in outdoor experiences with mentors who encouraged curiosity, exploration, and hands-on learning. With notebooks, pencils, and sun-protective caps in hand, these newly certified Junior Master Naturalists are ready to keep building their skills and appreciation for the natural world—experiences that may even inspire future careers in caring for and protecting the environment.



A Junior Master Naturalist shows off a native plant.

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