

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.



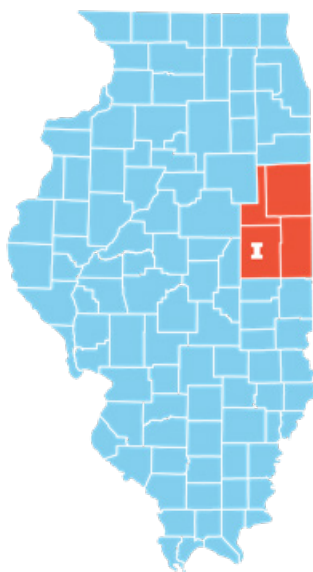
Serving Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Ginger Boas
County Director

Empowering communities through education and innovation



Innovation often begins with curiosity — a desire to explore new ideas, embrace challenges, and reimagine what is possible. At Illinois Extension, this spirit of innovation drives our mission to develop educational programs, extend knowledge, and build partnerships that empower people and communities across Illinois.

Guided by our vision to foster sustainable development, lifelong learning, and community resilience, this year's programs exemplify our commitment to leveraging cutting-edge research, advanced technology, and collaborative partnerships. Whether through workshops that reintroduce traditional skills like food preservation and sourdough starting, Master Naturalist projects that connect volunteers with meaningful environmental restoration efforts, or 4-H programs that inspire and equip the leaders of tomorrow. Our initiatives reflect a dedication to excellence, inclusivity, and transformative education.

As a leading force in the fields of environment, food and agriculture, health, community, and economy, we strive to equip every community member to thrive in an ever-evolving world. This year's accomplishments highlight not only the creativity and dedication of our educators and volunteers but also the enthusiasm and resilience of the individuals and families we serve.

In the pages ahead, you'll discover stories that celebrate innovation, connection, and the collective efforts of our Extension family. These examples illustrate how our mission and vision come to life in impactful ways, building a brighter future for all.

Thank you for your ongoing support and partnership. Together, we are creating a legacy of learning, sustainability, and empowerment that will benefit our communities for generations to come.

Ginger Boas
County Extension Director

Cover photo:
The Danville Library Pollinator
Garden maintained by
Master Gardeners and Master
Naturalists.
Photo by Jake Keister.

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

Connecting communities



Extension Day celebrates collaboration and learning

For years, University of Illinois Extension has been described as the “best-kept secret” in our community. While flattering, we believe that our resources and programs shouldn’t remain a secret. Instead, we’re committed to sharing our knowledge and opportunities with the community. This past spring, we took a significant step forward with Extension Day at the Martens Center — a vibrant celebration of learning, connection, and collaboration that showcased the wide range of programs and resources available to empower individuals and strengthen community connections.

The Martens Center, a community hub on Champaign’s North End, provided the perfect setting with its state-of-the-art facilities, including a commercial kitchen, gym, indoor track, garden area, and play areas for children. “It’s a hidden gem,” said Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden. “This event was about opening those doors and letting the community explore not just the Martens Center but also the incredible resources Extension and its partners offer.”

A Day of Learning and Fun

Extension Day featured engaging exhibits from all eight Illinois Extension program areas, including:

- 4-H youth development activities,
- Family Life and Financial Planning guidance,
- Nutrition and health education through SNAP-Ed
- Horticultural advice from the Master Gardeners, and
- Environmental initiatives led by the Master Naturalists.

Seventeen local organizations like the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, OSF Healthcare, and the Trauma and Resilience Initiative joined the effort, creating a comprehensive resource fair.

Attendees didn’t just learn — they connected and participated. During a free cooking session, families attended hands-on demonstrations, such as crafting a vibrant Fiesta Quinoa Salad. “It was tasty,” said Regina Blackmon, a participant. “My son never eats things like this. I’m thrilled he enjoyed it.”

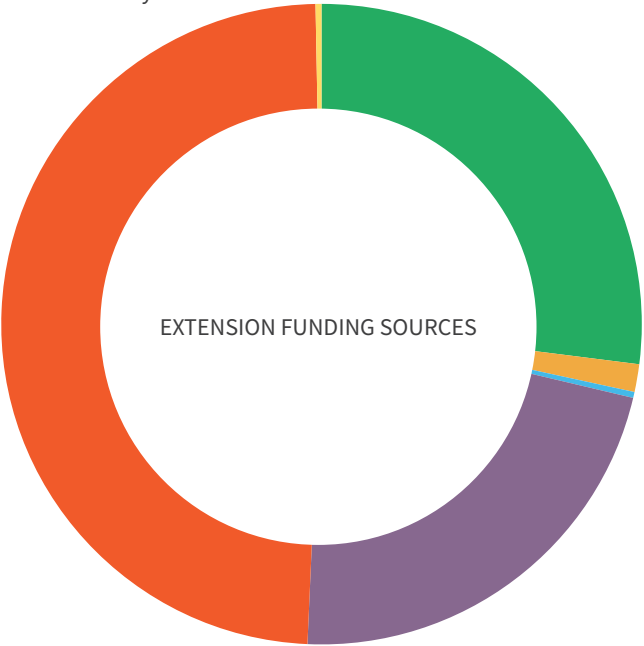
Building Stronger Communities

“Our goal was to highlight the breadth of Illinois Extension’s services while creating a welcoming and fun environment,” Bowden explained. “We wanted to build awareness and show how Extension can be part of their lives — whether through education, nutrition, or gardening advice.”

The enthusiastic turnout and positive feedback affirmed the event’s success in fostering connections and meeting community needs. “Hearing children laugh and seeing families walk away with something valuable — whether a new recipe, health information, or a smile — is why we do this,” Bowden added.

Looking Ahead

The overwhelming success of Extension Day has set the stage for future events. Plans are underway to expand partnerships and activities for next year, ensuring an even greater impact on the community.



Amount	Source
27%	County Boards
1.4%	Local Foundations and Agreements
0.3%	Gifts and Donations
22%	State Funds
49%	Federal Funding including Federal Grants
0.3%	Ag Literacy



Making an impact

Staff embody mission of service through foodbank volunteer efforts

This past year, Illinois Extension staff demonstrated their commitment to community service by volunteering at the Eastern Illinois Foodbank. Across two mornings, Extension team members helped pack boxes for delivery and processed nearly 10,000 pounds of food, contributing to the fight against food insecurity in the region.

Volunteering at the foodbank is part of Illinois Extension's broader mission to support and strengthen local communities. County Director Ginger Boas emphasized the importance of giving back, stating, "Volunteering and giving back to the community are central to Extension's mission. Our programs are designed to educate and empower, but it's equally important for us to be active participants in the communities we serve. This hands-on work allows us to connect with our neighbors and make a tangible impact."

The efforts of Illinois Extension staff not only provided immediate relief to families in need but also underscored the organization's ongoing commitment to fostering a healthier, more resilient community. By volunteering their time and energy, Extension staff set an example of civic responsibility and community engagement.



SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden helps bag cereal at the foodbank.

Award winners transform communities through dedication and growth

Sara Seyfert, 4-H youth development coordinator for Ford and Iroquois Counties, was recognized with the Individual Extension Excellence Award at Extension's Annual Conference this past fall. Sara has gone above and beyond in her commitment to the Extension mission. Her exceptional ability to foster partnerships, particularly with school districts, has enhanced program resources and accessibility, ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all youth. Notably, Sara launched the "Emerging Leaders" group, empowering teenagers to identify community needs and implement their own initiatives, fostering personal growth and community engagement. Sara is a cornerstone of the 4-H team and truly embodies the essence of making the best better.



Sara Seyfert, 4-H program coordinator, Ford-Iroquois counties.

Emily Harmon, family life educator, was honored at the National Extension Association for Family and Consumer Sciences annual session with the Greenwood Frysinger Award. Harmon was recognized for her growth through mentorships. Harmon credits former Extension educators Chelsey Byers and Kathy Sweedler, County Director Ginger Boas and Cook County Family Life Educator Molly Hofer for helping shape her career, programming, and professionalism. The Greenwood Frysinger Award recognizes a family and consumer sciences Extension educator who has been either formally or informally mentored and has five years or less in Extension. Harmon's dedication to her community and her commitment to learning and growth through mentorship is a testament to her passion for empowering others and her bright future in Extension.



Emily Harmon, family life educator.





Celebrating diversity

SNAP-Ed intern Gaby Villaseñor teaches students about Day of the Dead.



Illinois Extension brings cultural day to life at Booker T. Washington STEM Academy

Classrooms at Booker T. Washington STEM Academy transformed into vibrant cultural hubs as Illinois Extension collaborated with the school to host an enriching Cultural Day celebration. More than 200 second through fifth-grade students embarked on a global journey, exploring diverse traditions through hands-on activities, authentic cuisine, and music with the help of Extension's 4-H, Nutrition and Wellness, and SNAP-Ed teams.

The event, rooted in Illinois Extension's commitment to fostering inclusive, community-driven education, evolved from a smaller-scale initiative. "We started with the culturally relevant garden at the school," said 4-H Youth Development Educator Mynda Tracy. "The kids chose what went in the garden, and a lot of the times, their selections were based on their heritage. Then, in the fall, we would cook with what we harvested. The kids enjoyed it so much that we decided to expand it into a full day with the rest of the school."

Planning for Authenticity

"Many of our families expressed a desire for their cultures to be represented in our cultural celebrations at the school," said Jenny Jamison, Booker T. Washington STEM Academy STEM science coordinator and coach. "We began discussing a day like today where other cultures could be celebrated, and students could learn various cultural components."

To achieve this, Illinois Extension worked with campus resources, including cultural student organizations and university departments like African American Studies, to identify individuals who could represent cultures authentically. Social media platforms, like Facebook, also helped find community members with expertise, such as drumming and calligraphy.

"Working with these experts gave us a broader perspective and made real-world connections," said Tracy. "They helped students understand that individuals are part of larger communities. While people have differences, these differences can be celebrated and hold significance."

Bringing Cultures to Life

Classrooms were transformed into immersive cultural experiences, each showcasing a specific region:

- South Korea: Students played "Gonggi," a traditional game akin to jacks, practiced chopstick skills, and enjoyed a delicious Korean snack.
- North Africa and the Middle East: They explored Arabic calligraphy by writing their names, crafted 3D pyramids, and sampled hummus with carrots.
- West Africa: The sounds of drums filled the room as students explored the region's artistic traditions and tasted African peanut soup.
- Central America: Mexican and Guatemalan traditions came alive with Day of the Dead crafts, Cumbia music, and tangy fruit seasoned with Tajin.



Music and activities filled the halls, immersing students in diverse cultural expressions. “We wanted to assure that the activities would not stereotype the culture but truly represent them authentically,” said Jamison. “The foods and activities were chosen strategically. Everything today was from the data they collected in those forms.”

Students and families alike valued the authentic cultural representation that the event provided. “I think having the students that are not only in the culture see themselves authentically displayed, but I think all of the other students being able to experience it from people that do have the talent and the knowledge to teach about their culture is great,” said Jamison. “That authentic delivery of information has been really cool to see. Those natural, cultural things we typically don’t see or have not seen in this building have come to life today.”

A Day to Remember

Illinois Extension’s role went beyond logistics. “We helped create the idea and then provided the connection to the community and the school,” Tracy explained. Extension’s network linked the school to university resources, enriching the event with authentic cultural representations.

This collaboration also fostered an appreciation for diversity among students. “I think having the students that are not only in the culture see themselves authentically displayed, but I think all of the other students being able to experience it from people that do have the talent and the knowledge to teach about their culture is great,” said Jamison.

The event demonstrated the power of collaboration between Illinois Extension, the school, and the community. “I’m so thankful for the community and the Extension office and for all of the volunteers who came here today to bring this activity to life,” said Jamison. “Having students and volunteers coming together in that capacity is what’s going to bring the most rewarding memories to the day.”



Kado Ngbe, a University of Illinois student, teaches Booker T. Washington STEM Academy students about the music of West Africa.

I’m so thankful for the community and the Extension office and for all of the volunteers who came here today to bring this activity to life.
Jenny Jamison, STEM science coordinator

Through thoughtful planning, strategic partnerships, and meaningful community engagement, Illinois Extension continues to demonstrate its dedication to creating inclusive learning experiences that inspire appreciation for diversity and cultural understanding.



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

Empowering youth voices



The Transformative Impact of the YPAR Program

At Kenneth D. Bailey Academy in Danville, a pilot program changes how youth view themselves and their communities. The Youth Participatory Action Research initiative empowers students to become active participants in addressing local issues. It capitalizes on existing relationships between staff at KDBA, 4-H Development Educator Mynda Tracy, and Community and Economic Development Extension Specialist Zach Kennedy in a collaborative effort with University of Illinois graduate students and researchers Amy Leman, the principal investigator of the project, and Jacinda Dariotis, the director of the Family Resiliency Center and a professor of human development and family studies. Funded by the Institute for Government and Public Affairs, this YPAR program aligns seamlessly with Extension's mission to foster community-driven change and youth development by giving them the tools to research, communicate, and take action.

Building Skills for Leadership and Change

The YPAR program set out to achieve a bold goal: to give youth a voice and the confidence to use it to make tangible changes in their community. "What we tried to do," explained KDBA teacher Libby Schnepel, "is increase the level of communication between our young people and the people in our community that hold the power to bring the change that they think we need in our local school and community."

Through the program, students engaged in problem-solving activities, learned to conduct interviews, and refined their public speaking skills. According to Mynda Tracy, a 4-H youth development educator, the transformation in these students was remarkable. "These kids have just transformed," Tracy



Kate Suchodolski, Armarni Eaton, Daniela Markazi, Cyntavia Suggs, Mariya McCullough, Krissa Sims, Tashonna Jones, Ariel Gosser and, in front, Libby Schnepel on the quad after speaking at the University of Illinois' Undergraduate Research Symposium. Photo by Nathaniel Underland.

shared. "You almost wouldn't recognize them because of the growth that they've had. There were students who would never speak up in class before, but now they're asking questions and speaking up against things that they do not agree with."

Fostering Community Connections

Central to YPAR is the idea that youth are not just future leaders but active community contributors today. Year one of the program facilitated meaningful interactions between students and community leaders, including members of the school board, representatives from Congresswoman Robin Kelly's office, and local community action groups like the Three Kings of Peace. Students in this cohort chose to focus on addressing violence and poverty in their community, two interconnected issues that deeply impacted their daily lives. Through conducting interviews, gathering data, and developing actionable solutions, they worked to understand the root causes of these problems and identify ways to create positive change. Their research and efforts helped to shine a light on areas that needed attention and empowered them to take ownership of the process and work collaboratively toward solutions that would benefit their community.

The success of the YPAR pilot program at KDBA has set the stage for broader implementation. With the development of a comprehensive toolkit, Leman, Dariotis, Kennedy, Tracy, and Extension staff aim to equip more schools and organizations with the resources to replicate the program. The ultimate vision is to create a ripple effect, empowering youth across communities to lead by doing, inspire change, and shape the future.

Students in the YPAR program had the opportunity to expand their reach beyond their community as well. They were invited to present their research and findings at the national 4-H True Leaders in Equity Institute, where they shared their experiences with a broader audience, gaining new perspectives and insights. They also had the privilege of presenting their poster, "The Flaws of Our Community: Is There a Connection Between Crime and Poverty?" at the University of Illinois' Undergraduate Research Symposium, where they were the only high school students presenting.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, the YPAR program is focused on expanding its reach and ensuring sustainability. As the program evolves," explained Schnepel, "there is also a vision to expand its scope within KDBA itself. "We're hoping in the future, when KDBA expands to lower grade levels, that the older students involve the younger students so that they're prepared if they enter KDBA high school to continue this program year after year."



Building bridges to fight social isolation

Family Life helps strengthen social connections

In today's increasingly virtual world, it's easy to feel isolated. Studies indicate that one-third of American adults struggle with feelings of loneliness, with more than 25% of adults over 65 considered socially isolated, making this issue particularly pressing for older adults, as social isolation can significantly impact their quality of life.

Recognizing this growing need, the University of Illinois Extension family life team collaborated with CRIS Healthy Aging and launched a class reaching all four counties about the importance of staying socially connected and what resources are available to them. "Don't Go It Alone: Improving Your Social Connections" aims to educate individuals on the concept of social isolation and offer practical strategies for moving toward meaningful relationships.

The workshop began with a look at the complexities of social isolation, followed by the physical, mental, and emotional outcomes of someone experiencing social isolation. After learning about the prevalence and consequences of social isolation, participants got the opportunity to learn practical strategies to strengthen their social networks through interactive sessions and expert guidance.

32

Family Life Programs Offered in 2024

575

Total Participants in Family Life Programming

13

Communities reached across Champaign, Ford, Iroquois and Vermilion Counties in Family Life programs



Family Life Educator Emily Harmon partnered with CRIS Healthy Aging Services to travel to several area libraries to educate older adults on the importance of staying socially connected.

Things like:

- Volunteering
- Calling, texting, or emailing friends or loved ones
- Going to events or meetings that you are interested in
- Utilizing Virtual Home Assistants
- Moving to an assisted or supportive living facility

Participants were also introduced to local programs and resources, giving them a broader understanding of what is available within their communities to support healthy social connections. One telling moment occurred when a participant, accompanied by their caregiver, expressed deep gratitude for the program. Initially hesitant to attend, they ultimately decided to participate and, upon completion, made a point of thanking the educators and told them, "Thank you for giving me a reason to get out of the house today." This interaction underscored the profound impact of these programs, providing a vital opportunity for connection and a place of belonging in their community. The workshop helped participants realize that the fight against isolation isn't something they have to face alone and that they could make small, meaningful changes in their daily lives with the proper support and knowledge.

The family life team has plans to expand this program and bring it to even more communities in the coming year, with hopes of partnering with local healthcare providers and elder care facilities within the region.

Bringing fresh perspectives



Educators team up to bring double-feature series to local communities

As newly appointed Illinois Extension educators, Emily Harmon and Rachel Mannen wanted to maximize their impact by delivering comprehensive family life and nutrition and wellness programming across four counties. Thus, the Double Feature program was born, an innovative approach that addressed a unifying theme from two distinct perspectives.

The team identified key areas of concern within each county through close collaboration with local partners. This data-driven approach ensured that the Double Feature program directly addressed the most pressing needs of community members. To date, nine successful Double Feature programs have been implemented across all four counties, with planning for 2025 in the works.

The Double Feature programs have encompassed a diverse range of topics, including stress management, grocery planning, decluttering strategies, diet management, cognitive health, sleep hygiene, and food safety. Addressing these various topics is a start to improving the community members' overall health and well-being. Two examples of featured lessons within the program are Cooking for One or Two and Where to Start: Decluttering Your Home and Finances.

Cooking for One or Two

With more and more people living alone or in small households, the challenge of cooking for one or two has become increasingly common. Traditional recipes often yield larger portions, leaving individuals with the challenge of adjusting the recipe or dealing with large amounts of leftovers.



Family Life Educator Emily Harmon (above) and Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen brought a series of double features to several local communities.

Illinois Extension Nutrition and Wellness Educator and Registered Dietitian Rachel Mannen offered valuable tips and tricks to address the challenge. "Planning ahead, reducing recipes, freezing leftovers, transforming leftovers, and trading freezer meals with friends and family are all ways to combat the weeks' worth of leftovers problem," says Mannen.

The class also provided a recipe book specifically tailored for one or two people to further assist participants in their culinary decluttering. This resource offered a variety of delicious and practical recipes that could be easily adjusted to suit individual preferences and dietary needs.

Where to Start: Decluttering Your Home and Finances

Literature suggests that while a cluttered home can be due to a lack of time or care, it can also be a sign of underlying mental health issues. "Clutter can be a major source of mental and financial stress," says Family Life Educator Emily Harmon. "By learning effective decluttering techniques, you can free up your home space and save money on unnecessary items."

Some of those techniques include:

1. Spurt Strategy. Take 5 to 15 minutes sporadically during the day to pick up and put away any stray items.
2. Prompt Put Away. If there are any tasks that can be completed immediately, do not put them off. It will be worth the time it takes to do it right then.
3. Castaway Container. If you come across something in your closet or drawers that you know you will no longer use, place it immediately in the castaway container for donation or resale.
4. Good Riddance Routine. Doing decluttering maintenance on a regular basis will soon become your good riddance routine. This will lessen the chance that clutter will build again.

Other classes in the Double Feature series included Head Strong: a Brain Health Workshop and Eating Right for Cognitive Health. The Double Feature program serves as a model for future initiatives, showcasing the power of integrated programming to address the complex needs of diverse populations.



9

Double Feature programs across all four counties



65

Participants across all sessions



Learn more about our family life program
go.illinois.edu/CFIV/Family-Life



Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen teaches a canning class at the INEP office.

Reviving tradition



Nutrition and wellness empowers communities with canning and sourdough workshops

In recent years, interest in traditional food preservation and preparation methods has spiked. This renewed appreciation for time-honored techniques reflects a growing desire for homemade, wholesome foods and a deeper connection to the food system. Recognizing this trend, Rachel Mannen, nutrition and wellness educator and registered dietitian, capitalized on this interest by offering canning and sourdough bread workshops to local residents, many of whom were introduced to these skills for the first time.

Eager to connect with their food and extend the life of seasonal harvests, many embraced the opportunity to learn this valuable food preservation skill. Mannen's canning classes offered practical instruction on safe and effective home canning techniques along with hands-on experience as attendees learned to can their own jar of apple marmalade. In some instances, locally sourced produce from family-owned farms like Curtis Orchard was used, further strengthening the connection to the local food system.

"Canning is a fantastic way to preserve the season's flavors and enjoy them all year round," said Mannen. "Learning the proper techniques to ensure food safety is crucial. This class taught the practical canning steps and emphasized the importance of doing it correctly to avoid any risks."



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



In addition to food preservation, there has been growing interest in traditional food preparation methods like sourdough bread. Known for its added health benefits, unique taste, and texture, home bread making has become a popular hobby and even a side business for some.

The series of workshops, led by Mannen, began with the science of sourdough fermentation. Participants learned the essential steps to build and maintain a starter, including feeding techniques, troubleshooting tips, and expert care practices. Attendees each left with their own sourdough starter, instructions for care, and recipes to try.

The success of both the sourdough and canning workshops highlights the growing demand for educational programs that promote sustainable and healthy food practices. By offering accessible and informative workshops, Illinois Extension helps individuals make informed choices about their food, connect with local producers, and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the craftsmanship and tradition behind their daily meals.

Nourishing minds; Empowering schools



Expanding nutrition education across central Illinois

This year, Illinois Extension's ABCs School of Nutrition took a significant step forward, offering broader access to food service professionals across central Illinois. The six-hour training welcomed 55 attendees and featured a robust itinerary designed to empower school food service managers and workers. The day began with a session on scratch, semi-scratch, and speed scratch cooking, followed by material on promoting school breakfast and standardized recipes, which included culinary math. After a lunch break, participants received Illinois State Board of Education updates, guidance on developing hazard analysis critical control points and food safety plans, and strategies for creating healthy lunchrooms.

The training was delivered in partnership with ABC's School of Nutrition and led by a team of experts, including SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen, Integrated Health Disparities Educator Alexa McCoy, Extension Outreach Associate for ABCs Leah Erke, and Illinois State Board of Education Monitor Andrea Gregory. This expanded format marks a shift from previous years, where training was limited to Danville High School in Vermilion County. It sets the model for future annual food service for K-12 Staff training events. Extension staff also gave away three commercial kitchen kits, including spoons, knives, whisks, and a scale.



From left to right: Nutrition and Wellness Educator Rachel Mannen, Integrated Health Disparities Educator Alexa McCoy, SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden, ABCs School of Nutrition Educator Leah Erke, ISBE representative Andrea Gregory, and Nutrition and Wellness coordinator Vanessa Jones at the Regional Learning Inservice training at the I Hotel and Conference Center.

A Holistic Approach to Nutrition Education

The ABCs School of Nutrition exemplifies the SNAP-Ed mission: delivering nutrition education where SNAP-eligible community members live, work, pray, play, and shop. The program takes a layered approach to ensure that healthy messaging reaches everyone who influences a child's nutritional environment.

For example, while community outreach workers teach students through engaging programs like Organ Wise Guys, SNAP-Ed educators extend the impact by training teachers, parents, and caregivers. This holistic approach reinforces consistent, healthy messages in the classroom, at home, and throughout the school environment, helping children and families make lasting changes to their health.

Why a Regional Training?

Expanding the training to a regional audience addressed the needs of school food service professionals who play a vital role in fostering healthy eating habits among students. Tracy Bowden highlighted the benefits of hosting group training sessions as a single-day event: "It gets everyone the continuing hours they need while providing useful education!"

Opening the training to multiple districts broadened its reach and created a collaborative environment for food service professionals to learn from each other. This year's event marked a significant milestone, ensuring that valuable resources and support are widely shared to benefit central Illinois schools.

As the program grows, its mission remains clear: empowering food service professionals and their communities to make informed decisions that lead to healthier lives. The Illinois Extension team continues to explore ways to enhance its impact, promising an even brighter future for nutrition education.



178
SNAP-Ed Programs in 2024



3,230
Total Participants in SNAP-Ed Programs in 2024



16,531
Total Contacts in 2024



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

Supporting stronger communities



SNAP-Ed rallies community to restock food pantry

In February, the Georgetown Township Food Pantry became the focus of an incredible community effort to fight hunger during a time of urgent need. The pantry, which supports approximately 75 families a month, faced severely low supplies. What began as a casual conversation about the need for a food drive quickly transformed into a full-fledged community event: the SOUP-er-Bowl weekend.

The event was a partnership between SNAP-Ed, the Georgetown Township Food Pantry, and Julee's Shooting Star Saloon. Known for her generous spirit and deep ties to the community, owner Julee Gay didn't hesitate to incorporate the food drive into her tavern's Super Bowl festivities. "She normally throws a big Super Bowl party, so it was natural to her to make it part of the celebration," said SNAP-Ed Community Worker Sheri Beck-Walker. Food donation bins were set up at local schools and the bar, and residents were encouraged to contribute non-perishable on the day of the event. Julee also advertised the drive on a local radio station and offered specials at her tavern to draw crowds.

The SOUP-er-Bowl weekend became a genuine community effort. Township trustees, high school football players, and cheerleaders volunteered their time to collect and organize donations. Area businesses pitched in, and families from across the region came together to support the cause. "Once people realized how low the pantry was and how many families were relying on it, the response was overwhelming," said Beck-Walker.

Thanks to the community's generosity, the food drive helped replenish the pantry's shelves through the holiday season, ensuring families in Georgetown Township had access to nutritious food for months to come. The event provided immediate relief and highlighted the importance of ongoing support for local hunger relief efforts.



Vermilion County SNAP-Ed Community workers Dee Hauan (left) and Sheri Walker (right) helped rally the community to help restock the Georgetown Township food pantry.



Through hands-on activities like this cooking demonstration, SNAP-Ed programming is fostering healthier habits and supporting the future of early childhood education in Illinois by empowering families and educators with practical nutrition and wellness strategies.

Empowering families and childcare providers

In 2024, Illinois Extension's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education partnered with Birth to Five Illinois to support early childhood education initiatives in Vermilion County. Tracy Bowden, SNAP-Ed educator, delivered two impactful trainings: one equipping parents with strategies for engaged parenting and another focused on nutrition and physical activity for childcare providers and local leaders. These efforts align with Illinois' goal of improving access to high-quality early childhood education and care services.

Bowden joined the Vermilion County Birth to Five Illinois Action Council, which identifies barriers, proposes solutions, and advocates for equitable resource access. New INEP Program Administrator Jenny Spinks also joined a similar council to serve Champaign and Ford counties. Birth to Five Illinois, launched in 2022 with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, established regional councils in 39 areas to amplify community voices and shape policies addressing local needs.

"The framework amplifies community voices to inform policies and funding priorities," Bowden explained. "It's exciting to contribute to a system that puts families at the center of decision-making."

SNAP-Ed's work with these local councils ensures regional input influences decisions that support families and shape the future of early childhood services across Illinois, empowering every Illinois child to thrive.





Growing together

The Douglas Discovery Garden serves as a place for local residents to get fresh produce in a neighborhood where residents sometimes struggle to get it.



How the Douglas Discovery Garden is cultivating more than just plants

Nestled across from Douglas Park in Danville, the Douglas Discovery Garden is blossoming into more than just a place for fresh produce — it's becoming a vital part of the community. What started as a simple gardening initiative is now a place where growth occurs on multiple levels, not just among the plants but within the fabric of the local community.

One of the unique aspects of DDG is its location in a food desert, where access to fresh, affordable produce has always been a challenge. With two nearby stores closing, the need for accessible food resources has become even more pressing. In response, DDG has become a lifeline for many residents, including unhoused veterans, who rely on the garden as a source of nourishment. However, as Jenney Hanrahan, Vermilion County Master Gardener coordinator, explains, measuring the garden's success in terms of pounds harvested is a difficult task. "It's hard to measure what we grew this year because community members harvest directly off the vine," she says. "But that's the beauty of it. The garden is there for people to take what they need."

Community Growth Beyond the Garden

The growth at DDG isn't just in the vegetables — it's in the people. The community has embraced the garden in ways that go beyond just picking produce. Volunteers have helped plant, tend, and harvest crops.

Recognizing the need to support the community members, volunteers wanted to educate garden users on how to harvest produce at a time when they could use best use it. From there,

Extension staff developed a system of green, yellow, and red signs to indicate when produce is ready to harvest. This simple yet effective solution has helped ensure that the community can make the most of the garden while learning more about growing and harvesting fresh food.

The garden's educational mission goes beyond just informational signs; it has become a place for education and hands-on learning. DDG partnered with the Vermilion County Peer Court program this year, which provides community service opportunities for local youth. Katie Osterbur, who runs Peer Court, brings teens to the garden to help with various tasks such as mulching, composting, and harvesting. These young people also take part in lessons on gardening and healthy eating. "Our kids from Peer Court wanted to come back and keep helping in the garden," Jenney says. This relationship highlights the impact the garden has had on local youth, providing them with valuable life skills and a sense of responsibility.

Collaborating with Local Organizations

In addition to Peer Court, DDG has collaborated with other local organizations, including the Danville Area Community College and the local prison, to gather additional support for the garden's operations. Thanks to a former prison employee, these groups have contributed to the garden's development, helping with everything from building new planters to repairing raised beds.

The growth of DDG goes beyond the physical space — it's about creating opportunities for community members to come together and learn. For adults, the garden offers a series of

educational programs, such as SNAP-Ed's "Create Better Health" series, which focuses on healthy eating and food preparation. These classes occur right in the garden, allowing participants to see and use the produce they've helped grow. "We leave recipes in the garden so that people know what they can do with the produce when they harvest it," says Sheri Beck-Walker, a SNAP-Ed community worker and Master Gardener who leads the lessons.

A Resource for the Community

Despite what was collected by the community in the garden, volunteers were able to harvest nearly 540 pounds of produce, which was then donated to the Garden Share program for older adults who may not otherwise have access to fresh produce.

Looking ahead to next year, DDG plans to expand its offerings, focusing on vegetables that require little to no preparation and catering to those who may not be able to cook. The garden will also grow more crops in response to community demand. While hot peppers have been popular at food pantries, they've not been as popular in the garden. In contrast, crops like cabbage have attracted unwanted attention from groundhogs, leading to plans to reduce those plants next year.

Through it all, DDG's success story lies in its ability to bring people together. People of all ages and backgrounds come to DDG to help, learn, and, most importantly, eat better. It's not just about growing food — it's about growing a stronger, more connected community. As Jenney Hanrahan says, "The growth is coming from the people as much as the garden." With each passing season, the Douglas Discovery Garden continues to demonstrate that when communities nurture one another, everyone thrives.



DDG partnered with Vermilion County Peer Court program this year. Peer Court participants enjoyed tasks like mulching and composting, but also received lessons on healthy eating from SNAP-Ed.

Helping others grow: Longtime events showcase Master Gardeners' legacy

As the Master Gardeners mark 50 years of service across Illinois in 2025, two long-standing events in Champaign and Vermilion counties continue to exemplify their mission to "help others grow." Garden Day in Danville and the Garden Walk in Champaign-Urbana have been beloved traditions for decades, connecting gardeners and communities while providing education, inspiration, and opportunities to celebrate the joys of gardening.

Each March, Garden Day signals the unofficial arrival of spring in Danville for many area gardeners. This consistently sold-out event features a day packed with learning and camaraderie, thanks to a strong partnership with Danville Area Community College. "We could not ask for a better partner than DACC," said Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau. "Being able to use this whole building for a full day is just invaluable. We couldn't have put on such a wonderful event without them."

Attendees at Garden Day enjoy expert-led sessions covering a wide range of topics, from attracting birds and pollinators to improving soil health, growing culinary herbs, and diagnosing common garden problems. These practical and engaging presentations empower attendees to cultivate their gardens while deepening their connection to the natural world.

By June, the Garden Walk ushers in the warmth of summer, welcoming over 1,800 visitors annually to explore some of Champaign-Urbana's most beautiful and creative gardens. For decades, this event has been a cornerstone of the Master Gardeners' efforts to share knowledge and foster community. Visitors explore private and public gardens, gaining fresh ideas and making meaningful connections. "The amount of education available on the Garden Walk is just amazing," Pankau shared. "Providing new ideas by seeing what the homeowners have done, and even just by interacting with other gardeners on the tour, is a great experience for everyone. To be able to do that year after year and impact so many people is incredible."

Both events highlight the Master Gardeners' commitment to extending education beyond the garden bed. Vendors showcase their products and services, providing local businesses with a platform to connect with their community. Additionally, these events have become opportunities to feature other Extension and university programs, including 4-H, the Master Naturalists, and the University of Illinois' Pollinatorium, which was a featured stop on this year's Garden Walk. Plans are already underway to expand these partnerships across other university organizations in the years to come.

As the Master Gardeners celebrate their golden anniversary, the enduring success of Garden Day and Garden Walk is a testament to the power of their mission.





Cultivating change

The Impact of the Idea Garden Veggie Section

This year, the Champaign County Master Gardeners' Vegetable Section at the Idea Garden was honored with the 2024 State Master Gardener Teamwork Award for their innovative work in educating the public about gardening and providing fresh produce to local food pantries. Through creative approaches to vegetable gardening and a commitment to education, the team has created a space that not only grows food but also cultivates a deeper understanding of sustainable practices, community involvement, and the joy of gardening.

The team's vegetable section is a vibrant and engaging space that serves as an educational hub for the community. Each season, the group selects a theme for their garden beds, such as folk and fairy tales from 2022, to encourage family participation. They incorporate a variety of plants that support these themes, such as the Three Sisters story featuring corn, beans, and squash, and use eye-catching signage with QR codes that link visitors to additional resources about the vegetables and their uses. By creatively blending children's literature with gardening, the team fosters a deeper connection to the land and offers educational opportunities for all ages. The inclusion of vertical gardening, container planting, and intercropping enhances the beauty and productivity of the space while maintaining an innovative approach to soil management.

Celebrating Innovation and Community Impact

In addition to educating the public, the team has made a lasting impact on their local community by donating 526 pounds of vegetables to local food pantries. This commitment to service is at the heart of the team's mission and is a direct result of



From left to right: Champaign County Master Gardeners Marvin Paulsen, Manroop Chawla, Jeanne St. Peter, Kathryn Weisbaum, Gwen Wilson, Kathy Zeiders, Kate Kelly and Cheryl Bicknell all help make the Veggie Section a success.



Master Gardener Karen Pollard weighs a bag of kale harvested from the Idea Garden veggie section. The veggie section donated 526 pounds of produce to local food pantries in 2024.

their gardening efforts. Their innovative approaches to using compost and winter sowing ensure that they grow high-quality produce that is both sustainable and accessible. The use of sustainable integrated pest management has also been a key factor in maintaining the health of the garden without relying on synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. By implementing practices like planting alyssum to attract beneficial insects and surrounding the beds with leeks, onions, and garlic to deter pests, the team has created a healthier, more biodiverse garden that helps mitigate pest damage and supports local wildlife, including hummingbirds, other pollinators and praying mantises.

Growing the Future

The Vegetable Section's work continues to inspire others in the gardening community. Their use of affordable, accessible materials—such as custom-cut cattle panels for vertical trellises—offers a replicable model for gardens across the state, demonstrating how innovative gardening can be achieved on a budget. The team's efforts to grow from seed, use compost, and incorporate sustainable techniques show that gardening for the community can be both environmentally friendly and cost-effective. As the Idea Garden expands to include more educational resources and grow programs for younger gardeners, the team's hope is that their efforts will continue to inspire future generations. With plans to engage younger students in the program and teach them the importance of sustainable gardening practices, the team ensures that the seeds they've planted in both the soil and the community will continue to grow for years to come.

Restoring nature for future generations



Community collaboration revives Sibley Burr Oak Grove

Master Naturalists cultivate a deep appreciation and respect for the natural world, fostering a sense of belonging within it. Through education, conservation, and outreach, they become engaged stewards of their local environments, working to protect the natural resources where we live to ensure our world is fit for the future.

The Sibley Burr Oak Grove is a unique natural treasure located in Northwestern Ford County which contains three ecosystems: oak savannahs, wetlands, and restored prairies. It is home to a collection of centuries-old Burr Oak trees, some more than 400 years old, and several diverse species, including the American woodcock, which calls it home. Yet, over recent years, invasive plants have begun to threaten its ecological integrity, reducing the area's biodiversity and accessibility.

Community-Driven Leadership

Seeing it in this state had been a source of great frustration and grief for several residents who remembered when their families would gather for picnics or hikes in the grove. The memories of what the grove meant to the community spurred one Master Naturalist to take action. "It hurt my heart to see the grove deteriorating like it did," says Master Naturalist volunteer and Ford County Resident Terri Davis. With this in mind, Davis approached Extension staff and got to work. With support from Extension staff, Davis coordinated with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to set a date and actively engaged local organizations and service clubs to rally community support for the cleanup effort.

On a chilly November morning, 45 volunteers made up of Master Naturalists, residents, and even Boy Scouts gathered to help reclaim the grove from invasive species like bush honeysuckle and autumn olive. While several volunteers split into groups that cleared nearly 2.5 acres of invasive growth, others sprang into action in other ways, some providing snacks and warm drinks to help keep spirits high.

The volunteers worked hard from the Northern edge of the grove to the edge of the wetland area to help take the first steps to reclaim the grove. While this activity was significant, it was just the beginning for Master Naturalists and local volunteers.

To Davis, building a community around the project was very important. "It's so encouraging to see the interest in stewarding the grove," says Davis. "I've known the grove my whole life; I grew up four miles away from the grove. I want to get community groups and community involvement to develop a corps of people that will stay involved and nurture future stewards of the grove."

Looking Ahead

Perhaps there was no better way to exemplify why this cleanup took place than a Boy Scout exclaiming at the end of the cleanup that he and his troop would love to be involved in any further restorations. "To hear the Scout enthusiastically say that he and the other Scouts will help with future stewarding was so rewarding," said Davis. "I believe in the importance of providing opportunities to learn about and interact with our natural areas. The Master Naturalists played an important role in teaching local teens and adults about caring for these natural areas."

By teaching volunteers how to remove invasive species and sharing knowledge about the grove's ecological and cultural significance, Master Naturalists fostered meaningful connections between participants and the natural world. The impact of such efforts extends far beyond the immediate results, creating a legacy of care and stewardship that ensures natural spaces like Sibley Burr Oak Grove will thrive as a sanctuary of biodiversity for generations to come.



A volunteer helps a Boy Scout remove the stump of a tree during the Sibley Burr Oak Grove cleanup.



A blooming success

Visitors to the Danville Public Library are now greeted to the sight of colorful native wildflowers thanks to the Master Naturalists and Master Gardeners.



Pollinator garden transforms into an educational space



The sidewalks outside the Danville Public Library buzz with life as bees, butterflies, and even some mydas flies dart among the vibrant blooms of a flourishing pollinator garden. This beautiful oasis along busy Vermilion Street in downtown Danville is more than just an eye-catching display—it's a community-led effort to combat pollinator decline and promote sustainable landscaping.

“In recent years, research has uncovered alarming drops in pollinator populations around the globe,” notes Extension Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau. “This pollinator decline has led to lots of interest in planting pollinator-supportive gardens filled with native plants.” With this growing awareness, Extension volunteers transformed underutilized plots at the library into a vibrant pollinator haven that not only beautifies the community but also addresses the critical issue of pollinator decline.

This transformation is thanks to the dedication of the Vermilion County Master Gardeners, East Central Illinois Master Naturalists, and the Danville Public Library.

The Vision and Planning

In 2021, the plots now home to the pollinator garden were landscaped with old rose bushes, grass, weeds, and other non-

native plants offering little ecological value. Recognizing an opportunity to enhance both aesthetics and sustainability, the library reached out to the Vermilion County Master Gardeners for help.

“Some people at the library had a vision to make a native plant garden, but not everyone was on board,” explained Kristin Camp, a Master Gardener and Master Naturalist. “So, we invited the director, the groundskeeper, and the library board president to visit the native garden at my house. Within five minutes, they were sold!” With this support secured, Extension volunteers began transforming the space into a vibrant pollinator haven.

The Transformation

The project rolled out in three phases:

- Spring 2022: The initial planting along Vermilion and Seminary Streets included a variety of native plants, such as prairie dropseed, salvia, rudbeckia, purple coneflower, butterfly weed, and bee balm. These plants were chosen for their ecological benefits and visual appeal.
- October 2022: Volunteers added 80 shrubs and two trees, including redbuds and native species like New Jersey tea, leadplant, and spicebush, selected for their fall color and support for pollinators.
- 2023: The final phase layered shorter plants in front and taller plants behind, creating a dynamic, seasonally appealing design.

Today, the garden is alive with activity, attracting a diverse range of pollinators while providing a striking visual display for library visitors.



Find tips on planting your own pollinator garden
pollinators.illinois.edu

The Garden's Impact

This pollinator garden has transformed the library grounds into a community treasure. Beyond its beauty, it serves as an educational tool, showcasing the importance of native plants in supporting pollinators. It has blossomed into a beautiful space and educational resource that inspires and empowers the community to embrace native planting.

The Vermilion County Master Gardeners hosted a class at the library to discuss the project's journey and highlight the benefits of planting native pollinator gardens. This class not only celebrated the garden's success but also encouraged attendees to consider similar projects in their own spaces.

Building on this success, in January and February of this year, the lessons learned from the Danville library garden were transformed into a program designed to help others create their own native landscapes. The Native Landscape Design Workshop is a two-part series guiding participants through the process of redesigning their garden spaces with native plants to support pollinators and promote sustainability. Participants received hands-on guidance to design sustainable native landscapes for their own homes.

A Lasting Symbol of Community Collaboration

The Danville Public Library's pollinator garden is more than a project; it's a testament to what can be achieved when community members come together with a shared vision. By providing education, tools, and inspiration, the Vermilion County Master Gardeners are leading the way in fostering a sustainable future, one garden at a time.



The Pollinator Garden is a collaboration between Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists. (From left to right): Donna McCoy, Steve Wise, Kristy Herr Bartos, Mike and Kristin Camp.



Register your pollinator garden as a pollinator pocket
go.illinois.edu/Pocket

Master Naturalists bring nature education to the community



This year, the East Central Illinois Master Naturalists expanded their outreach by hosting a series of community hikes, providing opportunities for residents to explore local environments and learn from the diverse expertise of our volunteers. These events not only invited participants to engage with nature but also highlighted the wide range of knowledge and skills our volunteers bring to their work.

At Homer Lake, Chandler Womack led a Tree Walk, introducing participants to the art and science of identifying tree species. Attendees gained a deeper appreciation for the ecological roles of trees and how they support biodiversity, all while enjoying personalized discussions in a serene outdoor setting.

In Meadowbrook Park, Roger Digges, an author and member of the Audubon Society, guided participants through the park's vibrant meadow ecosystems. His engaging storytelling and expertise in birdlife inspired curiosity about the interconnectedness of habitats and wildlife, leaving attendees with a renewed appreciation for the natural world.

The impact of climate change was the focus of a hike led by Environmental and Energy Stewardship Educator Karla Griesbaum. Participants learned how global environmental shifts are affecting local ecosystems and explored practical actions they could take to address these challenges. Karla's leadership sparked meaningful discussions, empowering attendees to become advocates for change.

At the Carl Becker Preserve and the Iroquois County State Wildlife Area, participants explored the preserve's rich habitats with botanist and wetlands researcher Paul Marcum. They discussed the importance of habitat conservation and protecting native species. Paul's in-depth knowledge and enthusiasm made the experience both educational and inspiring.

"As an educator, I am incredibly grateful for the diverse expertise our volunteers bring to the table. With so many different backgrounds and areas of knowledge, we can offer a broader range of specialized topics for our community to learn from," said Karla Griesbaum. "Whether it's ecology, conservation, or climate change, the wide array of skills and perspectives our volunteers share allows the Master Naturalists to provide experiences that are both engaging and educational. It strengthens our ability to reach and inspire others to connect with and protect the natural world."

By offering educational opportunities that cover diverse topics, the Master Naturalists continue to inspire community members to connect with and protect the natural world around them.

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