



**EXTENSION**  
IN ACTION

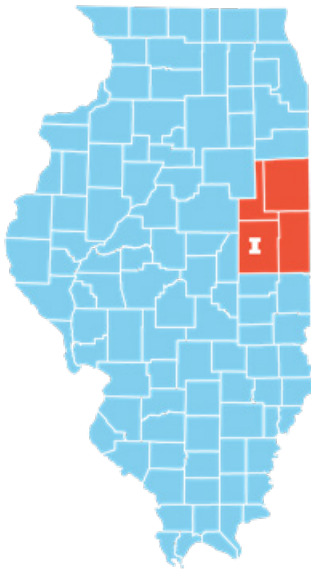
Serving Champaign, Ford,  
Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties

ILLINOIS EXTENSION 2023





Ginger Boas  
County Director



# Collaborating for Impact in Underserved Communities and Area Schools

As I reflect on the past year, one theme emerges: expansion. We haven't just maintained the momentum of our existing programs; we've actively sought out new audiences and communities, particularly in urban neighborhoods, rural areas, and local schools, where the need for our services is often most pronounced.

This expansion stemmed from a deep understanding that knowledge and opportunity should be accessible to all, regardless of location or background. We believe that by reaching out to underserved communities, we can amplify our impact and contribute to building a more equitable and resilient society.

This annual report will tell the story of our journey. You'll read about:

- Innovative programs designed to address the unique needs of rural communities, from financial literacy workshops to mental health awareness campaigns.
- Fruitful collaborations with local schools, bringing our expertise directly into the classroom and empowering young minds.
- Inspiring stories of devoted volunteers dedicating countless hours to bringing beauty, knowledge, and mentorship to the hearts of their communities.

I invite you to celebrate our team's dedication, our supporters' generosity, and most importantly, the resilience and potential of the communities we serve.

Ginger Boas  
County Extension Director

Cover photo: An oak tree at Homer Lake Preserve. 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 five grand challenge themes:



**Community:**  
Support Strong and Resilient Residents



**Economy:**  
Grow a Prosperous Economy



**Environment:**  
Sustain Natural Resources at Home and in Public Spaces



**Food:**  
Maintain a Safe and Accessible Food Supply



**Health:**  
Maximize Physical, Mental, and Emotional Health

## 2023 Engagement

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

657 Communities Served	745K+ Program Attendees	12.7M+ Webpage Views	58.5M+ Social Media Impressions	1.8M+ YouTube Views
555 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	90 Online Courses Accessed by 12K+ People	10,158 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,799 4-H Clubs	199,400 4-H Experiences

## Partnerships

5,682  
Program Volunteers

274  
Community Gardens

2,634  
School and Community Partners

## Resource Generation

\$15,259,785  
Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$463,368  
Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated

\$4M+  
External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners



Students at Iroquois West High School participate in the Welcome to the Real World Simulation.

# Welcome to the Real World



## High school simulation prepares teens for financial reality

Equipping students with financial literacy in high school isn't just about teaching them to balance a checkbook; it's about empowering young adults to navigate a complex financial world with confidence by cultivating healthy spending habits, discouraging impulsive purchases, and promoting long-term financial goals. Sadly, most local institutions have trouble including these experiences in traditional classrooms, a learning gap identified by Extension Educators Myla Munro, Mynda Tracy, and Emily Harmon.

"Financial literacy is one of the most requested subjects from schools and community organizations," says Family and Consumer Sciences Educator Emily Harmon. "In today's world, financial education is crucial, which is why there's been so much excitement from schools, volunteers, and more that we've recontinued this program."

Extension staff state-wide collaborated for months, updating and editing the existing curriculum into the newly titled Welcome to the Real World, an interactive simulation guiding students through real-life financial experiences. From deciding on a career to deducting taxes, establishing savings accounts, and paying back student loans, teens are introduced to money-related scenarios that are just around the corner for most of them.

"Learning financial literacy is just like learning any other new skill; it takes the right tools and some practice," explains Extension Educator Myla Munro. "The Welcome to the Real World curriculum equips youth with the knowledge bank they need, and the simulation, guided by volunteers from various subject fields, gives them practice at making great financial choices even before graduation."

Word has gotten out about the program's success; schools are eager to have the team back. "The program gives students a better perspective of living in the real world and prepares them for life after graduation. I was so excited to see the curriculum revamped," said Watseka High School Assistant Principal Erika Sterrenberg.

Reaching more than 200 local students, the program's first year has been wildly successful, so much so that the team now offers training and resources to educators around the state.

"Seeing the program's initial impact, reaching that many students in the first year and now getting to be part of carrying that movement beyond our region, empowering educators with training, that's the real success story," observed Extension Educator Mynda Tracy.

The trio has plans for additional simulations and educator training in the coming year.

Students compete in the 4-H Regional Food Challenge.

# How the Illinois 4-H Food Challenge is tackling Illinois' employment gap



Like many states, Illinois faces a formidable challenge: underemployment and unemployment rates that hurt individuals and the state's economy. With a national unemployment rate of 3.6%, Illinois sits at a worrying 4.5%, the fourth highest in the nation. But the numbers tell only part of the story. A stark 7.7% underemployment rate – individuals working part-time for economic reasons, the marginally attached to the workforce, and the unemployed – paints a picture of untapped potential and unfulfilled dreams.

Breaking this cycle requires innovative solutions, and Illinois Extension's 4-H program has found one in the Illinois 4-H Food Challenge. This program, a partnership with the local Education for Employment System #330 and area school districts, empowers Family and Consumer Sciences culinary arts students with the tools and skills they need to navigate the competitive food service industry.

The program is built on a foundation of research-based classroom lessons aligned with the Experiential Learning Model. These engaging sessions, easily integrated into existing culinary curricula, go beyond basic cooking techniques and delve into essential knowledge like food and kitchen safety, nutrition, flavor profiles, plating, and time management. Each lesson doubles as a practical challenge, fostering creativity, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills – vital in any workplace.

But the program's true test lies in the culinary competition, a regional event that throws students into a fast-paced, high-pressure environment mirroring the professional kitchen. Here, they get to showcase their culinary prowess, refine their skills under the scrutinizing gaze of judges, and feel the adrenaline rush of competition. This crucible hones their precision and focus, prepares them for demanding kitchens, and instills confidence beyond the culinary scene.

Beyond sharpening culinary expertise, the Illinois 4-H Food Challenge cultivates transferable skills – collaboration, communication, and teamwork – critical for any industry's success. As students learn to navigate the heat of the kitchen alongside their peers, they develop the ability to function effectively in diverse teams, a crucial asset in today's hyperconnected world.

With its innovative approach and demonstrable impact, the Illinois 4-H Food Challenge is a valuable model for workforce development programs across our unit. By nurturing talent, instilling confidence, and fostering essential skills, the program is not just cooking careers; it's equipping students with the skills and confidence needed to excel in the workforce.



Students from Urbana High School plan their meal for the 4-H Regional Food Challenge.



# The spark of curiosity



## How Cloverbud Camp bridged the gap for 4-H families

Ford and Iroquois Counties presented a unique dilemma for 4-H: a disconnect between the needs of the youngest and oldest members. On one hand, Cloverbuds, eager to explore and learn, needed more engaging workshops tailored to their age and interests. On the other hand, older teens craved meaningful leadership opportunities, a void further amplified by the sparse population density across the two counties.



Ford-Iroquois 4-H Program Coordinator Sara Seyfert talks with Cloverbuds as they decorate their flowerpots.

A cloverbud pets Rip, a calf at Cloverbud Camp.

This seemingly disparate set of challenges was, in fact, two sides of the same coin. The lack of Cloverbud workshops created a missed opportunity to cultivate passion and inspire project ideas, potentially leading to a drop-off in interest as they transitioned to “big kid” 4-H. At the same time, the need for more structured leadership roles left older members disconnected from their younger counterparts and yearning for ways to contribute.

Thus, Cloverbud Camp was born, an innovative solution tackling both issues simultaneously by engaging these two age groups in a shared experience. The camp aims to spark curiosity and exploration in Cloverbuds with interactive stations showcasing diverse 4-H projects while employing older teens as mentors, developing their leadership skills, and fostering connections with younger members. The result brought together the two age groups, creating a sense of community and understanding.

Teen-led stations included animal care, showmanship, entomology, horticulture, aerospace, and more.

While all Cloverbuds went home with smiles, several left with inspiration for projects to pursue upon graduation. Of the attendees, 17 are now in “big kid” 4-H and will present their projects for the first time this fall, with confidence gained at Cloverbud Camp.



A cloverbud learns how to present a sheep at the fair.

Seeing curiosity in the eyes of the Cloverbuds ignited a fire within teenage volunteers, too, many eager to shape younger generations' 4-H experiences. Since then, a group of emerging leaders has formed to develop more workshops and activities for younger 4-H'ers. The teens left Cloverbud camp that day, wanting to give younger 4-H members the same valuable experiences they'd been given.

Cloverbud Camp helped light the spark, and now the 4-H'ers in Ford and Iroquois Counties are ready to pass the torch to the next generation of 4-H leaders.



## Health Rocks: Empowering Ford County youth with essential life skills through evidence-based programming

In spring 2023, the three Ford County school districts met with 4-H officials to identify what programming they felt their students needed the most. These conversations identified a clear demand for programming to enhance student health and social-emotional well-being. In collaboration with Susan Sloop, health and wellness specialist at Illinois 4-H, the Health Rocks program was selected as the optimal solution. After this conversation, educator Myla Munro began to develop Google Slides lessons using the curriculum, and the program was launched in Ford County fourth grade classrooms in the fall of 2023.

The Health Rocks curriculum, meticulously researched and developed by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, provides a structured framework for fostering crucial life skills within young learners. Through engaging bi-weekly sessions, students participate in interactive activities and lessons designed to cultivate positive social and emotional development by building healthy friendships, practicing

effective communication, and honing conflict resolution skills; promoting informed decision-making by encouraging responsible choice-making in various aspects of life, including nutrition and physical activity; and empowering youth with essential life skills by developing resilience, building self-confidence, and fostering leadership potential.

The impact of the Health Rocks program on Ford County's fourth graders extends far beyond engaging activities and interactive lessons. Data from weekly assessments and a final survey paint a compelling picture of positive change. Nearly all students expressed agreement that their choices impact their future, demonstrating a crucial awareness of long-term consequences. Over 99% grasp the link between smoking and lung cancer, highlighting the program's effectiveness in debunking harmful misconceptions. Recognizing peer pressure tactics, 97% of students confidently assert their ability to resist substance use. Perhaps most significantly, 92% of students feel empowered to confide in trusted adults when facing stress, underscoring the program's success in fostering open communication and emotional well-being.

One student's quote, "I feel more comfortable sharing with other kids about the dangers of smoking, drugs, and alcohol," exemplifies the program's ability to cultivate peer leadership and positive influence.

As these young learners confidently share their newfound knowledge, the ripple effects of Health Rocks extend beyond the classroom, potentially impacting the health choices of their entire community.

While the program is still in its early stages, the initial successes bode well for the future of this program. Health Rocks provides a valuable resource for promoting comprehensive youth development in Ford County by equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the challenges and opportunities of youth. Ultimately, the program promises to empower a generation of healthy, socially adept individuals who are well-equipped to contribute positively to their communities and lead fulfilling lives.



**95**  
4-H Clubs in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois & Vermilion Counties



**1,192**  
Total Club Members



**109**  
Adult Volunteers



Find Information on your local 4-H clubs at  
[go.illinois.edu/CFIV4H](https://go.illinois.edu/CFIV4H)



Family Life Educator Emily Harmon (left) leads a Coffee Talk at Catlin Library.

## Bringing tools and training to rural communities

Access to healthy living resources is often limited in rural Illinois, presenting a unique challenge. Addressing this issue head-on, Illinois Extension’s Family Life team launched two initiatives this year focusing on brain health and social isolation in rural locations across Iroquois, Vermilion, and Champaign counties.

Brain Health - It’s A No Brainer! is a research-informed course that educates adults about normal memory changes and aging. Family Consumer Sciences Educator Emily Harmon partnered with local libraries to deliver the series, highlighting healthy brain contributors and offering tips to lessen everyday forgetfulness.

Extension Educator Emily Harmon observes, “People don’t worry about what is expected with cognition and memory until they age. That’s often when people start to worry whether



FCS Program Coordinator Abbi Litell talks at a health fair in Danville.

their experiences are normal or of concern. The brain health programs we offer discuss 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 can do across the lifespan to contribute to our brain health.”

The team partnered with the Alzheimer’s Association for the series to increase awareness of common signs and symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease, highlighting the importance of early detection, a subject often missed due to a lack of information and resources in rural areas.

Collaborating with local public libraries, the team also addressed older adult social isolation as it was recently declared a nationwide public health crisis. The Don’t Go It Alone: Improving Your Social Connections program encourages fostering connection and belonging, crucial strategies for positive emotional and mental health. Recognizing rural communities’ unique challenges, Emily and her team have taken a significant step forward with their efforts and plan to expand their program offerings to these regions and beyond in the coming year.



**184**  
Participants in Family Life Programs



**18.4**  
Average number of participants per program



**83.9%**  
Of participants felt they learned from programs



Learn more about the Family Life team  
[go.illinois.edu/CFIV/Family-Life](https://go.illinois.edu/CFIV/Family-Life)





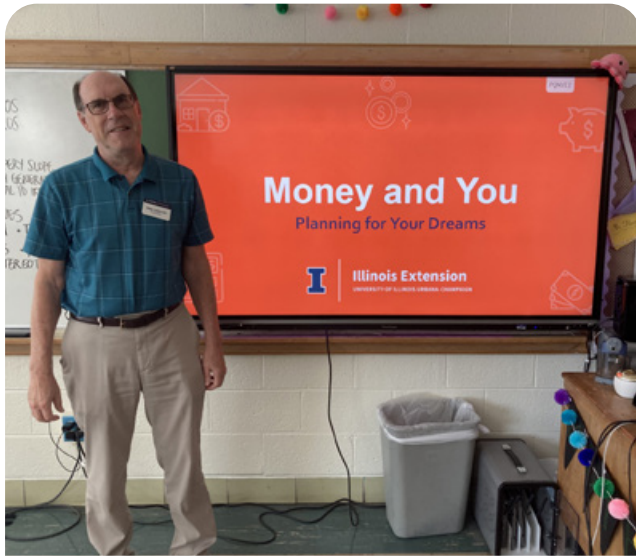
## Money Mentors equip middle schoolers with financial literacy tools

Building on the success of their initial partnership, Illinois Extension’s Money Mentors volunteers returned to Champaign’s Franklin Middle School for a second year to educate students on core financial literacy skills with the Money and You series. Over 200 eighth graders benefited this year from interactive lessons delivered weekly by dedicated Money Mentor volunteers.

“Seeing our students grasp these financial concepts and engage in conversations about money with their families is very rewarding,” says Family and Consumer Sciences Educator Emily Harmon. “By equipping them with these tools early on, our hope is that they will make informed financial decisions throughout their lives.”

The series covers key fiscal concepts like managing income, saving, and spending. Trained Money Mentors volunteers deliver valuable and engaging lessons through interactive exercises, drawing on their own experiences to make the material relatable.

The Money Mentors program is a testament to the impact of community collaboration.



Money Mentor Peter Ashbrook at Champaign’s Franklin Middle School as part of the Money and You series.



**6,431**  
Reached by the Finances team in 2023



**653**  
Finance Program participants



Learn more about the Finances Team  
[go.illinois.edu/CFIV/Finances](https://go.illinois.edu/CFIV/Finances)



## EFNEP empowers communities: Transforming lives one wrap at a time

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program is vital in empowering individuals and families to make informed choices about their health and well-being. The program’s impact extends beyond simple instructions; it fosters lasting behavioral changes that ripple through communities, creating a healthier outlook for future generations.

### Reaching hearts and minds: adapting to diverse needs

Recognizing the dynamic nature of communities, EFNEP’s dedicated community worker staff employs a multifaceted approach. They engage with families and youth in diverse settings, catering to individual needs and cultural contexts. Whether through traditional in-person interactions or innovative virtual lessons, EFNEP remains committed to connecting with participants where they are. This year, by forging 12 new partnerships with local organizations and community leaders, EFNEP has further expanded its reach and impact, ensuring its diverse offerings resonate with an even wider audience.

### From reluctance to delight

The program’s effectiveness is often best understood through personal stories. Take, for instance, the recent youth session where veggie wraps were on the menu. Despite initial hesitation, even resistance, from some participants, the experience ultimately led to a heartwarming shift in their perspectives. Those who initially expressed reluctance requested the recipe, eager to recreate the wraps at home. Even a participant who initially walked out returned, seeking seconds and acknowledging a newfound appreciation for vegetables. This small instance exemplifies EFNEP’s ability to break down barriers and foster positive change, even amid initial reservations.

### Investing in change, building a brighter future

EFNEP’s impact goes beyond individual stories; it represents a collective effort toward building a healthier future for communities. The program creates a ripple effect by empowering individuals and families to make informed choices, promoting better health outcomes for future generations. Together, we can ensure a future where everyone can thrive and live healthier lives.



**28**  
EFNEP Partnerships with Community Organizations



**224**  
Adult EFNEP Program participants



**360**  
Youth EFNEP Program Participants



## How the Illinois Deer Donation Program nourishes Champaign County

Protein is the most requested item at food banks and pantries nationwide, and Champaign County is no exception. This vital nutrient is essential for building and maintaining muscle, supporting cell function, and boosting immunity. Unfortunately, access to protein can be a significant challenge for food-insecure individuals and families. Food pantries often receive their meat from food banks, which often have a hard time obtaining meat due to a lack of donations and funding.

The Illinois Deer Donation Program steps in to bridge this gap. Launched in 2022 and expanding to 16 counties in 2023, the program partners with hunters who have harvested more venison than they need for their households. These hunters can donate their surplus to local processing facilities, like Riverbend Wild Game in St. Joseph. The processed venison is then distributed to participating food pantries, ensuring it reaches those who need it most and allows hunters to utilize their surplus venison ethically. A total of over 850 pounds of donated venison was distributed to four food pantries: Hope Center, Community Service Center Northern Champaign County, St Vincent DePaul in Urbana, and Salvation Army of Champaign. This translates to hundreds of meals rich in essential protein, reaching families facing food insecurity.

SNAP-Ed's role didn't end there. Community outreach workers set up "Eat.Move.Save." booths at each food pantry that received donations, offering venison samples and educational presentations on lean proteins, healthy recipe ideas, and valuable resource materials. This holistic approach empowers individuals to make informed choices about their diets and maximize the nutritional benefits of the donated venison.



A demonstration table set for the Illinois Deer Donation program at local food pantries, featuring venison samples.

In the coming year, SNAP-Ed remains committed to expanding the program's reach and impact. Increasing awareness among hunters and pantries, forging new partnerships, and collecting data to track the program's long-term effects are just a few of their ongoing efforts.

## Breaking bread, breaking barriers: Food summit sparks collaboration

Champaign County is home to several organizations working to fight food insecurity. However, despite the work that they were all performing, they seemed to be largely unaware of the work that other organizations were doing, and one of the most common refrains that our educators heard whenever they would talk about one of these organizations was, "I didn't even know they existed." Our educators and several leaders of these local organizations realized there was a need to bring these agencies together to help find the best way to solve this problem in our community, and their work culminated in the Champaign County Food Summit.

The summit featured over 100 participants from growers, producers, educators, food pantries, food banks, and other local institutions working together to help solve this problem. The day featured 10-15-minute presentations about their latest project, new food map, community garden, or other specialty. SNAP-Ed Educator Tracy Bowden presented on Find Food Illinois, Eat.Move.Save., and the Local Food Purchasing Assistance program (now known as Illinois Eats). Then, in the afternoon, participants with similar goals were paired in smaller groups to discuss how their organizations could connect and collaborate.

Since the Food Summit, SNAP-Ed has been able to communicate more with food pantry managers and has begun to collaborate more with them. Several other community organizations have been able to connect and begin to work towards fighting food insecurity in Champaign County. Because of the success and new partnerships formed from the Food Summit, Illinois Extension and other local organizers plan to make the event annual to help local groups work towards their common goal for years to come.



100+ Participants in the Champaign Food Summit



60+ Organizations Present at the Food Summit



39 SNAP-Ed partnerships with community organizations



## SNAP-Ed sprouts healthy habits across generations in Champaign County

SNAP-Ed is on a mission to empower people of all ages to make healthy choices. Recognizing the growing need for comprehensive nutrition education across all ages, they've proactively forged valuable partnerships and developed innovative programs this year, bringing healthy choices to both youth and seniors in meaningful ways.

### From Farm to Family: POP Club Grows Future Foodies

One of the first groups that SNAP-Ed collaborated with was a long-time partner, the Land Connection, to launch the POP (Power of Produce) Kids Club to nurture a love for fresh, local produce in children. Once a month, the club sets up a booth at the vibrant Champaign Farmers Market, inviting kids to explore seasonal delights like tomatoes, pumpkins, apples, and peaches. Through interactive activities and tastings, they learn about the benefits of locally grown food and how to stretch their SNAP dollars at the market. The program's success has been so great that SNAP-Ed plans to bring the lessons learned at the market online through engaging videos.

### School Cafeterias Get A Healthy Makeover

SNAP-Ed's impact extends beyond farmers' markets. In the Danville School District, their commitment to nutritious school meals took root in the form of a transformed cafeteria. SNAP-Ed helped transform the high school cafeteria by introducing a salad bar and a health bar offering fruit, yogurt parfaits, and vegetarian wraps – all available to students at no extra cost. But their commitment didn't stop there. Recognizing the need for broader change, SNAP-Ed partnered with the Illinois State Board of Education and ABC's Nutrition team to provide annual training sessions for staff and food production managers across the district. The training covered essential topics like share tables, standardized recipes, food safety, and production plans, empowering staff to create healthier, more sustainable school meals.



4,184  
Reached in 2023



25  
Changes adopted by SNAP-Ed Partners



31  
Partnerships with K-12 schools



5  
Partnerships with Early Childhood Centers



Learn more about INEP  
[go.illinois.edu/cfiv/illinois-nutrition-education-programs](https://go.illinois.edu/cfiv/illinois-nutrition-education-programs)

### Nourishing Knowledge for Seniors

Seniors are often one of the most overlooked groups when it comes to nutrition education. To bridge this gap, SNAP-Ed partnered with local independent living facilities to bring the Create Better Health curriculum – specifically designed for seniors – to their residents. Over 180 participants learned valuable skills like menu planning, meal prep, understanding nutrition labels, and differentiating between fruits and vegetables. The curriculum also offered hypertensive- and diabetic-friendly recipes, catering to the group's diverse needs. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants is a testament to the program's success. SNAP-Ed is committed to expanding its reach in the coming year, with plans to expand the POP clubs to include outreach to seniors.

These are just a few examples of how SNAP-Ed works tirelessly to cultivate a culture of healthy living in Champaign County. By fostering partnerships, developing engaging educational programs, and tailoring their approach to specific demographics, they empower people of all ages to make informed choices about their food and well-being.

Through these interconnected efforts, SNAP-Ed is cultivating a culture of health that spans generations. From the playful discovery of fresh produce at the market to the comprehensive training of school staff and the empowering lessons for seniors, their programs demonstrate that healthy eating can be a delicious adventure for everyone. As seeds of knowledge are sown, nurtured, and finally harvested into positive choices, SNAP-Ed ensures that the future of food is vibrant, nutritious, and inclusive for all.



Community Worker Della Jacobs prepares a recipe preview for the POP Club at the Urbana Farmers' Market.



Vermilion County Master Gardener Cathy Bolser and trainee Daniel Combs view plants in the VA Greenhouse.



## Gardening program offers hope and healing for local veterans

Introducing programs incorporating gardening topics and greenhouse use holds immense potential for supporting veterans' overall well-being, boasting physical, mental, social, and cognitive benefits. The VA Illiana Health Care System and Vermilion County Master Gardeners partnership use these programs to foster a sense of purpose and empower veterans to thrive in their post-military journeys.

This year's new initiative, Lunch and Learn, offered monthly, half-hour classes featuring topics like seed-starting, fall clean-up, tomatoes, and Christmas cactus. "Gardening topics are always the most requested programming from our participants," says Maggie Verklan, VA Illiana Whole Health Coordinator. "We couldn't think of a better group to carry out those lessons than our local Master Gardeners."

Beyond the Lunch and Learn series, Extension went a step further to support local veterans. Retired teacher and Vermilion County Master Gardener Cathy Bolser offers in-depth weekly gardening classes at the VA Illiana Health Care System's greenhouse in Danville, providing veterans with dedicated learning opportunities.

"We're providing education, but more than that, we're giving veterans a safe and comfortable environment for dealing with whatever issues they may have," says Cathy. "We provide a supportive network for them where, socially, they're interacting with and helping each other. The regular class participants are great examples to the residents of the growth you can

experience through the VA system, demonstrating how far each has come. Sometimes, we get gardening done, but other times, we do more talking than gardening. I'm answering the gardening questions, but they are working through their issues together, experiencing social and emotional growth as a community. Seeing that connection with nature and with each other has been truly inspiring."

One participant, Daniel Combs, isn't just attending Cathy's gardening classes; he's on a mission to become a Master Gardener himself. "When I first started coming to the greenhouse as a patient, I had no idea what was going on or what I was supposed to do. I didn't have a green thumb, so I was usually just killing plants," he says. "Over time, it became very beneficial for me, socially and emotionally, to be out here talking with the other veterans and building relationships. I kept my head up and found more and more things to get involved with in the greenhouse, including the Master Gardener program. Now I'm planning a garden and growing produce to sell at farmers' markets, all things I never thought I would be able to do before I started working with this program."

Daniel's story embodies the transformative power of gardening, not just for veterans but for whole communities. "The mindful act of tending to plants and being immersed in nature contributes to stress reduction and improved mental well-being," offers Extension horticulture expert Jenney Hanrahan. "Our mission has always been to help others learn to grow; the programs Cathy and many other volunteers are doing for the VA and throughout Vermilion County perfectly express that statement. We're so thankful for their continued willingness to extend their time and talent to serving their community."



A bee stuffs itself in a flower.  
Photo by Ann Tice.



## Local team of volunteers takes on pollinator decline crisis

Beyond filling our plates, pollinators play a hard-to-detect but crucial role on a global scale. While it's easy to focus on their contribution to our food supply, with 35% globally relying directly or indirectly on their work, their impact stretches far wider.

Across the United States, over 150 crops, from juicy berries to crunchy nuts, depend on the tireless work of pollinators. Their economic value is staggering, generating \$29 billion within the US alone and contributing \$235-\$577 billion globally.

But these tiny heroes are facing a crisis. Headlines feature their well-documented decline, one that has likely not been driven by a single factor. Instead, scientists agree that a combination of factors, including pesticide exposure, habitat destruction, pest pressure, disease, invasive species, and climate change, has dramatically impacted pollinator health.

One local program, developed by volunteers in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion counties, significantly impacts pollinator populations across Illinois.

"Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists understand pollinators' critical role in our ecosystem," says Horticulture Educator Ryan Pankau. "That's why they created the Pollinator Pockets program, a powerful grassroots initiative helping restore regional pollinator habitats. It's a scalable solution that anyone can be a part of."



Learn more about our Pollinator Pocket Program at [go.illinois.edu/PollinatorPocket](http://go.illinois.edu/PollinatorPocket)

Aiming to empower individuals to become stewards for pollinators, our user-friendly provides information and resources to help homeowners plan their pollinator habitat. From educational videos and tips on how to plant the perfect plant arrangement for pollinator support to actual example designs and reference materials about pollinator-friendly plants, our website is helping homeowners create pollinator habitat pollinator-friendly plants; our website is helping homeowners create pollinator habitats every day.

Homeowners and gardeners can plant confidently with this expert knowledge and valuable resources. And plant they did. Since its inception in 2016, the program has rapidly grown in popularity, reaching the impressive milestone of 500 pollinator pockets registered across six states.

"Year over year, the Pollinator Pocket website and the program grow in success, leading the state in clicks, resulting in some impressive statistics," says Website Editor and Communications Coordinator Jake Keister. "We're excited to start working with the state communication team to bring the program to even more people in the coming year."

"The program has been used as an outreach tool and conversation starter, spreading the word about pollinators' ongoing plight while offering a positive solution: plant more pollinator habitats!" says Pankau.

The success of the Pollinator Pockets program proves that local action, driven by dedicated volunteers and accessible resources, can make a tangible difference in tackling environmental challenges.



An orange sulphur butterfly lands on a stiff goldenrod. Photo by Teresa DeWitt.



## Master naturalists take center stage during Climate Action Week

When polled about their environmental passions, Master Naturalists consistently rank climate change as their top concern. Recognizing this dedication, Master Naturalists played a vital role in Climate Action Week, a collaborative effort led by the Champaign County Climate Coalition and the Urbana Park District. “Climate Action Week is a great opportunity to get our community talking about climate change in constructive ways, said Savannah Donovan, the environmental program manager with the Urbana Parks District. “The wide array of topics explored through different program opportunities demonstrates the many ways that each of us can make a difference, often through the choices we make in our everyday lives. We can, and we must, act on climate change. Working together, we are so much more than the sum of our parts.”



Master Naturalist Elizabeth Jeffery (right) talks to others on a breakout hike. Photo by Melissa Records.

Throughout the week, Master Naturalists, alongside Illinois Extension staff, led engaging events that connected the public to nature and its role in mitigating climate change. They hosted captivating bat walks and tree walks, allowing participants to explore the interconnectedness of ecosystems and their vulnerability to climate change. Additionally, Master Naturalists actively participated in the week’s culminating event, the Climate Action Celebration. Equipped with informative booths, they engaged festival attendees through interactive displays and conversations, fostering a deeper understanding of individual and collective responsibility in addressing climate challenges.

“Participating in Climate Action Week was an incredibly fulfilling experience for our Master Naturalists,” shared educator Ryan Pankau. “It provided a valuable platform to share their expertise and passion, ultimately empowering individuals to become informed stewards of our environment.” Beyond their scheduled events, Master Naturalists donned their signature orange volunteer shirts and participated in “Ask a Master Naturalist,” offering their knowledge and answering questions about climate change during the entire week. This approachable format fostered informal dialogues and sparked meaningful interactions, leaving a lasting impact on the community.

Climate Action Week serves as a testament to the collective power of community action. By leveraging the diverse expertise of Master Naturalists and Extension staff, the event ignited a shared responsibility for environmental stewardship and empowered individuals to contribute to a more sustainable future.



## Garden Walk celebrates community spirit and artistic expression

The Garden Walk, a cherished annual tradition for the Champaign County Master Gardeners, continued its strong comeback after a brief hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The revitalization of this beloved event bloomed anew in 2023, surpassing all expectations with ticket sales exceeding 1,800 — a testament to its enduring appeal within the community.

This year's walk displayed six private gardens, each uniquely expressing the homeowner's passion and horticultural expertise. From gardens decorated with kitschy decor to towering redwoods, each space offered a glimpse into the heart and soul of its creator. Public gardens, including the ever-evolving Idea Garden, showcased innovative design and landscaping techniques, inspiring attendees to cultivate their green havens.

Beyond the captivating floral displays, the event offered a delightful expansion of its craft vendor market. This year, the market witnessed a significant increase in size and selection, featuring an array of local artisans showcasing their unique talents. From handcrafted pottery and exquisite jewelry to delectable homemade jams and organic soaps, the market provided a vibrant hub for attendees to discover and support local talent.

The overwhelming success of the event, fueled by positive feedback from attendees and vendors alike, underscores its profound impact on the community. The Garden Walk fosters a sense of connection, celebrates local talent, and ignites a shared appreciation for the beauty and wonder of nature. Committed to nurturing this cherished tradition, the organizers look forward to expanding the event's offerings and reach in the coming years.



A craft vendor booth at the Idea Garden during the Garden Walk. The vendor fair was greatly expanded at the 2023 event.



## Plant trials at the Idea Garden bloom further in 2023

Since its inception in 2001, the Proven Winners® has blossomed into a cornerstone of the local gardening community. 2023 witnessed continued growth in the number of varieties trialed and its educational impact.

The program's success hinges on the collective effort of passionate volunteers. Notably, a dedicated crew orchestrates the impressive task of transplanting over 1,000 plants from university greenhouses to the Idea Garden each spring. It's noteworthy that the Idea Garden stands as the only volunteer-led organization participating in the esteemed Proven Winners® trial program, a testament to the remarkable dedication of the team.

Beyond fostering knowledge within the dedicated volunteer team, the program embraced a broader educational mission. Outreach programs were initiated for other master gardener groups, fostering collaboration and empowering a wider audience to make informed gardening decisions. This initiative was spearheaded by Master Gardener Ann Tice, a dedicated volunteer who developed a comprehensive program on plant trials in the Idea Garden. She first shared her program with fellow local Master Gardeners at the Idea Garden, and due to the positive response, she began traveling to other groups, spreading the valuable knowledge gleaned from the trials. Witnessing the positive response from her peers, she has begun giving talks on the plant trials to other master gardener groups and sharing the invaluable knowledge gleaned from the Idea Garden's trials.

By offering valuable information and fostering a vibrant community of gardening enthusiasts, the Idea Garden's plant trials program is poised to continue blooming as a vital resource for years to come.



Master Gardener Ann Tice talks about the Proven Winners® plant trial program during a demonstration at the Idea Garden.

---

## STAFF

Ginger Boas  
County Director

Mynda Tracy  
4-H Youth Development  
Educator

Amanda Bryant Brown  
Vermilion County 4-H Youth  
Development Program  
Coordinator

Amy Banner  
Champaign County 4-H  
Youth Development Program  
Coordinator

Allison Pratt  
4-H Metro Youth Program  
Coordinator

Gracie Schleaf  
Ford-Iroquois Counties 4-H  
Youth Development Program  
Coordinator

Sara Seyfert  
Ford-Iroquois Counties 4-H  
Youth Development Program  
Coordinator

Megan Stites  
Vermilion County 4-H Youth  
Development Program  
Coordinator

Karla Griesbaum  
Energy and Energy  
Stewardship Educator

Ryan Pankau  
Horticulture Educator

Melissa Berg  
Master Naturalist Program  
Coordinator

Lucy Cross  
Champaign County Master  
Gardener Program Coordinator

Jenney Hanrahan  
Ford, Iroquois and Vermilion  
County Master Gardener  
Program Coordinator

Valerie Nicolini  
Champaign County Master  
Gardener Program Coordinator

Emily Harmon  
Family Life Educator

Rachel Mannen  
Nutrition and Wellness  
Educator

Vanessa Jones  
Nutrition and Wellness  
Program Coordinator

Abbi Littell  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
Program Coordinator

Betty Gavin  
EFNEP Educator

Tracy Bowden  
SNAP-Ed Educator

Josue Aguilar  
Champaign County EFNEP  
Community Worker

Jamie Holland  
Champaign County EFNEP  
Community Worker

Della Jacobs  
Champaign County SNAP-Ed  
Community Worker

Kathy J Miller  
Champaign County EFNEP  
Community Worker

Sheri Walker  
Vermilion County SNAP-Ed  
Community Worker

Janet Wright  
Vermilion County SNAP-Ed  
Community Worker

Mindy Jefferson  
Marketing and  
Communications Coordinator

Jake Keister  
Marketing and  
Communications Coordinator

Ryan Norris  
Marketing and  
Communications Extra Help

Lexy Palacios  
Business Associate

Tonya Bernstein  
Office Support Assistant

Jaide Jamison  
Office Support Associate

Deborah Mikel  
EFNEP & SNAP-Ed Office  
Support Associate

Melany Morris  
Office Support Assistant

Pam Munro  
Office Support Assistant

Janet Tendick  
Office Support Extra Help

---

## OFFICE INFORMATION

### Champaign County Extension

801 N Country Fair Dr., Suite D  
Champaign, IL 61821  
(217) 333-7672  
Fax: (217) 333-7683  
Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm

### Ford-Iroquois County

**Extension**  
916 Seminary Ave.  
Onarga, IL 60955  
(815) 268-0163  
Fax: (815) 268-4051  
Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm

### INEP Office

201 W Kenyon Rd., Suite 3  
Champaign, IL 61820  
(217) 353-0740  
Fax: (217) 351-2019  
Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm

### Vermilion County Extension

3164 N Vermilion St.  
Danville, IL 61832  
(217) 442-8615  
Fax: (217) 442-8628  
Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm

---

## ONLINE



/UIExtensionCFIV



@UIExtensionCFIV



/UIExtensionUnit13

---



**Illinois Extension**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

### College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.  
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs are funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

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