

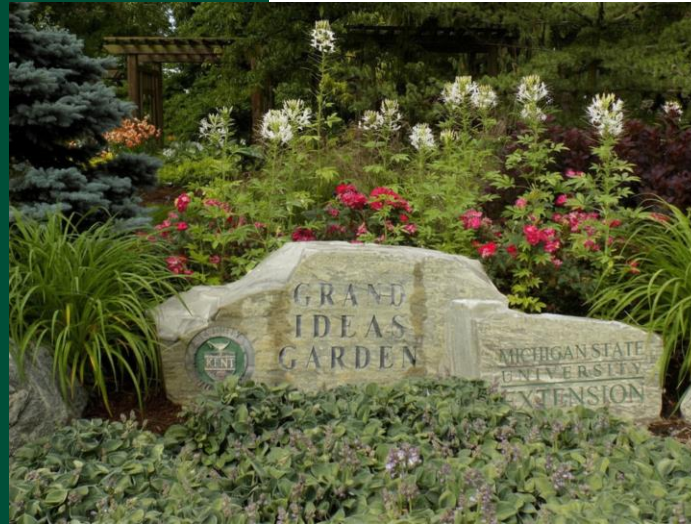
KENT COUNTY 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

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Message from the District Director

During 2025, MSU Extension in Kent County advanced education across agriculture, natural resources, youth development, and health. Strong partnerships, measurable outcomes, and county-wide recognition underscored the value of this work. Through collaboration and innovation, Extension reached diverse audiences and strengthened local capacity. I thank Kent County partners and stakeholders for their collaboration, trust, and continued support of MSU Extension.

Sincerely, Kai Gritter

Impact



6,002 participants from the county attending MSU Extension programs



400 answered "Ask Extension" questions



4,432 participants attending **152** programs hosted in the county



281 total volunteers serving the county



880 programs (across the state) attended by Kent County participants



141 community partnerships



209 youth enrolled in 4-H



20 community coalition engagements

Community Impact



173,897 local contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts



445 client consultations



72,517 participants in community, food, and environment programs from across Michigan



476 virtual programs related to Financial Education, Food Systems, Water and Environmental Quality, Government and Businesses

Financial Literacy

In 2025, **218 Kent County residents** attended a variety of financial literacy webinars and in-person events. MSU Extension provides resources and education on money management, foreclosure prevention, buying your own home, retirement planning and more to help residents and their families be more financially healthy.

Some of the webinars Kent County residents attended included:

- Homebuyer Education
- Surviving & Thriving on a Fixed Income
- Savvy Tips for Small Business
- Informed Renter
- Retirement Myths & Facts
- Every Penny Counts
- Protecting Your Identity
- How Much Home Can You Afford
- Make a Spending Plan Work for You
- Tips to Build and Protect Your Credit
- Mortgage Foreclosure Basics



Economic Development, Environmental Conservation, and Agricultural Productivity



500 participants in county agriculture programs



441 soil test samples processed



130 residents who participated in Beekeeping or Pollinator programs



\$244.2 billion annual impact of food and agriculture on Michigan's economy

MSU Product Center

Michigan State University Extension and the Michigan State University Product Center assist entrepreneurs and businesses in developing products and services in the food and agriculture markets. Its team of experts consults with clients on a one-on-one basis, helping new entrepreneurs navigate from concept development to launch and beyond. The MSU Product Center also offers specialized services such as labeling, packaging, and nutritional analysis. If you are interested in business counseling from the MSU Product Center, please visit:

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/productcenter>



156 counseling hours



62 customers helped



14 jobs created



\$2,542,883 in increased sales



39 Kent County entrepreneurs attended the 'Making It In Michigan' Conference & Trade Show



30 jobs retained

Furniture City Creamery awarded 2025 Best Barrier Buster Award

The Michigan State University Product Center honored Rachel Franko, owner of Furniture City Creamery in Grand Rapids, with the 2025 Best Barrier Buster Award for overcoming significant business challenges. After outgrowing its small retail location, the company secured a Dairy Business Builder grant and additional financing to expand into a 4,129-square-foot production facility that opened in 2024.

Franko also successfully navigated the complex process of becoming a licensed dairy manufacturing plant, implementing new equipment, regulations, and operational systems. Support from the MSU Product Center and grant funding were instrumental in the business's growth, positioning Furniture City Creamery to expand wholesale, catering, and future retail operations.



Great Lakes Tinned Fish wins the 2025 Young Innovator Award

The Michigan State University Product Center recognized Marissa Fellows and Great Lakes Tinned Fish with the 2025 Young Innovator Award at the 'Making It In Michigan' Conference. Founded in 2024, the company, headquartered in Grand Rapids, is the first Midwest-based tinned fish business sourcing exclusively from the Great Lakes region and promoting sustainable fisheries. With support from the MSU Product Center, Fellows successfully navigated product development and regulatory

requirements while building a localized supply chain. The company has already earned national media attention and industry awards, positioning Michigan as an emerging leader in the growing tinned seafood market.



GLEXP0 2025

At the 2025 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, and Farm Market Expo & Michigan Greenhouse Growers Expo (GLEXP0), held December 8–11, MSU Extension educators and specialists organized 82 of the 109 educational sessions, drawing 3,282 attendees (**223 from Kent County**) and hosting 357 exhibitors. The event offered substantial continuing education opportunities, including 32 Michigan RUP credits and 70 CCA credits.



A highlight was the Farm Market Bus Tour, coordinated by Garrett Zeigler, Mariel Borgman, Derek Plotkowski, and Ben Phillips. The tour included 159 participants across three buses visiting five farm markets and agritourism sites.



IPM Tree Fruit Meetings

In 2025, **29 Kent County fruit growers** attended the weekly IPM Tree Fruit Meetings from April through July. Fruit team staff members worked together to host the statewide tree fruit IPM updates both online and in person at the west central and northwest research stations.



Milker Training at Spartan Dairy Farm

On December 22, 2025, MSU Extension's Martin Mangual hosted a milker training at Spartan Dairy Farm in Kent County. This training was implemented to discuss important background information for dairy milkers. The training covered basic anatomy and physiology along with the recommended milking prep procedure to maintain high standards for quality and animal well-being. The training directly impacted **225 dairy cows and 14 attendees**.

MI Ag Ideas to Grow With

The annual 'Michigan Ag Ideas to Grow With' virtual conference, hosted by Michigan State University Extension, provided farmers and producers (**37 from Kent County**) with opportunities to improve management practices and production systems. Animal agriculture educators hosted a dedicated livestock and lifestyle producer track featuring expert-led sessions tailored to the unique challenges faced by these operations.

Held virtually from February 24 to March 7, 2025, the conference featured interactive 30- to 60-minute sessions followed by Q&A opportunities. Participants gained practical, research-based knowledge they could immediately apply to their farms, while the virtual format expanded access to educational resources and connections with MSU Extension educators, supporting the long-term success of Michigan farms.

Smart Gardening Outreach

In 2025, MSU Extension’s Consumer Horticulture team engaged over 6,604 people through outreach at events like the Home & Garden Show, the 2025 Smart Gardening Conference, workshops, and webinars. **601 of those participants were from Kent County.** The Michigan Home and Garden Show at DeVos Place served as a major platform, where Smart Gardening outreach spanned four days. Extension Master Gardeners offered mini-lessons, educational tip sheets, and staffed an on-site exhibit, while also leading seminars for attendees.



131 Kent County residents
who participated in the 2025 Dig
In! Series



239 participants attending the 2025 Smart
Gardening Conference

Foundations of Gardening



In 2025, our MSU Extension Consumer Horticulture Team engaged a total of 792 participants (**57 from Kent County**) in two 10-week *Foundations of Gardening* courses, held in the fall and winter. These courses were open to both the public and those wanting to later apply for the MSU Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Program to volunteer.

The MSU Consumer Horticulture Team held ten “MSU EMG Program Onboarding” sessions statewide, training participants to become MSU EMGs, with both in-person and online volunteer training sessions.



Plant Quest 2025

Now in the fifth season, the Plant Quest webinar series drew 748 participants (**80 Kent County residents**), not just from Michigan, but across the nation. Hosted by MSU Extension, the series featured engaging, plant-focused topics including garden conifers, lessons from Stoneleigh, combining plants, and standout perennials.



To enhance accessibility, sessions were recorded and scholarships were awarded to some participants.

Overall, Plant Quest was a successful program that reached hundreds of participants from across the nation. The virtual format allowed this expansive reach and a diverse topic lineup appealed to a broad audience of plant enthusiasts.

Youth Programming

The goal of the 4-H Youth Development model is for 4-H to “provide kids with community, mentors, and learning opportunities to develop the skills they need to create positive change in their lives.” You needn't look further than the amazing staff, youth, and families in the Kent County 4-H program!



27 county 4-H clubs



209 enrolled youth in 4-H



1,908 total youth participants



125 total 4-H volunteers



Michigan 4-H Children's Art Exchange with China

Through Michigan State University Extension and Michigan 4-H Youth Development, the Art Exchange program promotes cultural awareness and global understanding by connecting Michigan youth with peers around the world through art exchanges. Since its inception, more than 300,000 Michigan youth have participated. During the 2023–2024 program year, 11 counties submitted 338 pieces of artwork for exchange with China. Building on its success, Michigan launched the SMILES (Share, Michigan, India, Learn, Exchange, Stories) project and continues to explore partnerships with additional countries and states, expanding opportunities for global learning and cultural connection. In 2025, 134 youth participated in the Art Exchange program, with **67 of those youth being Kent County residents!**

Health Rocks!

In 2025, **68 fifth graders** from Buchanan Elementary School in Kent County participated in Health Rocks with MSU Extension 4-H. The Health Rocks program uses the 4-H positive youth development model to help young people build confidence, communication, leadership, and decision-making skills that support healthy lifestyles and resistance to risky behaviors, including tobacco use, alcohol use, vaping, and other drug use.



Through interactive lessons on topics such as peer pressure, stress management, healthy relationships, and substance use prevention, youth develop resilience and the skills needed to make responsible choices. The program also incorporates the 4-H “Teens as Teachers” model, empowering youth leaders to positively influence their peers and families.

Kent County 4-H'er Receives Scholarship

In November of 2025, Kent County's Anton Koutychenko was one of 23 students who were awarded a **\$2,000 Michigan State University (MSU) Pre-College Scholarship** due to their involvement in 4-H Exploration Days. Any student who participated in an MSU-sponsored pre-college event was eligible to apply and had to write an essay and submit an application. The scholarship will be applied to Anton's first year at MSU as a degree-seeking student. Anton's mother shared that he is excited to be admitted to the MSU College of Arts and Letters to major in Apparel and Textile Design. **Congratulations, Anton!**



2025 State Horse Show

In August of 2025, **11 Kent County 4-H'ers** participated in the State 4-H Show. The three-day event included more than 275 classes of 4-H members and their projects competing on a statewide basis at the Michigan State University Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock.

Building a Partnership with the Kent County Youth Fair

For many years, the Kent County Youth Fair and 4-H operated independently. While local 4-H clubs continued to participate in the fair, involvement from MSU Extension 4-H staff and county-level programming was limited. A renewed partnership recently created opportunities for collaboration through a **school supply drive** benefiting the Storehouse of Community Resources and the introduction of a **4-H Fun Zone** at the fair. These successful initiatives reestablished a visible MSU Extension 4-H presence, strengthened relationships between the organizations, and laid the foundation for expanded collaboration and 4-H engagement in the years ahead.



Kent County MSU Extension Recognized

Kent County MSU Extension was honored at the Young Nonprofit Professionals Leadership & Recognition Awards, themed "Bridges of Impact," which celebrates organizations creating meaningful community connections. MSU Extension received the **Hidden Treasure Award**, recognizing its significant impact in West Michigan and its commitment to culture, access, and belonging. Adriana Sierra Ramirez, Kent County Urban Bilingual 4-H Program Coordinator, accepted the award on behalf of the organization. The event also recognized community partners, including Jose Rodriguez of Kent School Services Network, who received the Advocate Award, and Kent County 4-H volunteer Mikisha Plesco, founder of Cultivating Futures, who earned the Rising Star Award for her emerging leadership and community impact.

Public Health and Nutrition Programming



1,341 nutrition and physical activity participants hosted in-county



1,907 residents who participated in health and nutrition programs



15 nutrition and physical activity sites receiving Policy, Systems and Environmental (PSE) education within the county



59 policy, systems, and environmental changes at those PSE sites, impacting **2,683** people.



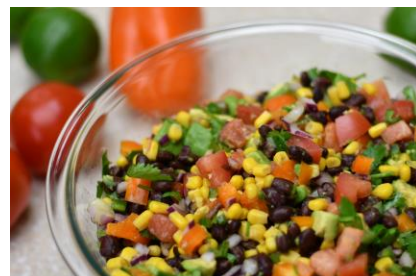
237 residents participated in Child & Family Development classes



584 residents participated in Health & Mindfulness classes

Garden Salsa

MSU Extension's Meghan Swayne hosted a SNAP-Ed-funded nutrition series for adults at Catherine's Health Center's Streams location. The curriculum was *Healthy Choices for Every Body*. At the first session she prepared a vegetable-packed garden salsa that was quick and easy to make. After one of the participants tried the salsa, she was pleasantly surprised at how tasty it was because she did not typically like a lot of vegetables. Her enjoyment of the salsa sparked a conversation about the many varieties that can include black beans, corn, pineapple, mango, and other ingredients. As she was leaving the class she told Meghan that when she got home, she was going to make more of the salsa and play around with the recipe to see what she could create!

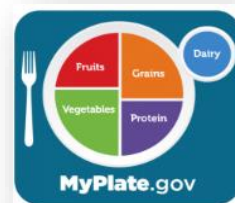


For salsa recipes, and more, explore: www.canr.msu.edu/extension-recipes These nutritious, delicious, and budget-friendly recipes are made for real life, whether you're cooking for one or feeding your family. From quick dinners to kid-friendly snacks, **we've got you covered!**

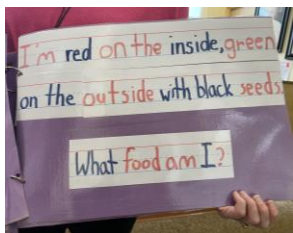
SNAP-Ed funding cut in 2025

For 30 years, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) helped people build healthy eating habits and be more active on a limited budget. Following a federal decision to end funding, the program was discontinued after July 4, 2025.

Through practical, hands-on education and local partnerships, Kent County-based Community Nutrition Instructors helped people with limited resources build lifelong skills around nutrition, cooking, physical activity, and budgeting for healthy meals.



Of note, our Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) funded Community Nutrition Instructors, Yesenia Velasco and Alexandria Payton, continue to provide nutrition programming in Kent County. In 2025, they partnered with multiple schools and community organizations!



Healthy Snacks at San Juan Diego Academy

A total of **81 students** in grades one through four at San Juan Diego Academy in Wyoming participated in MSU Extension's *Show Me Nutrition* program. The students were highly engaged and reminded their teachers of the importance of washing their hands! Following several nutrition and cooking lessons, many of the children requested copies of the recipes, which were provided during later classes.

During a final session, one student proudly showed her lunch bag, which contained the cauliflower salad prepared during a previous lesson. She shared that since participating in the classes, her family had been incorporating more fruits and vegetables into her daily snacks. The program coordinator also reported that after receiving bento boxes through the program, many participants began bringing them to school regularly filled with healthy snacks, including fruits and vegetables. These observations suggest that the program positively influenced both the children's food choices and their families' healthy eating habits!

Healthy Choices for Every Body

16 Kent County residents participated in *Healthy Choices for Every Body* classes. They gained practical nutrition skills through hands-on lessons, food demonstrations, and recipe preparation. Interactive activities, including visual comparisons of sodium, sugar, and fat in everyday foods, encouraged healthier choices, while many participants tried new foods such as eggplant and smoothies for the first time! By program completion, participants reported greater confidence preparing nutritious meals and received cooking tools to support lasting healthy habits at home.



Moms Learning, Families Thriving

Through the *Today's Mom* program, participants learned how to make informed nutrition choices during pregnancy by selecting nutrient-dense foods and interpreting nutrition labels. A hands-on label-reading activity helped participants understand how serving sizes affect nutrient intake. Many reported this was new information and expressed confidence in applying these skills at home to support healthier outcomes for themselves and their babies.

Cooking for One with Puertas Abiertas

Through a six-week *Cooking for One* series facilitated by Yesenia Velasco (pictured right), in partnership with Puertas Abiertas, **16 participants** gained practical skills to prepare healthy, affordable meals while improving food safety and budgeting habits. Women reported saving money by planning meals, shopping with lists, and using foods they already had at home. Several also shared they were eating healthier and becoming more physically active with their children. One expectant mother credited the program with helping her save money and build confidence as she prepares for parenthood.



Food Safety

In 2025, **349 Kent County residents** took classes and accessed resources from MSU Extension's Food Safety Team. This was a 54% increase from 2024! These classes covered a variety of topics that helped residents gain the knowledge and training to prevent foodborne illnesses. Some examples of the classes attended are:

- ServSafe®
- Preserving MI Harvest
- Michigan Cottage Food Law
- Serving Up Food Safety
- Selling Honey & Maple Syrup
- Guidance for Food Handlers
- Moving Beyond Cottage Food Law
- Safe Food = Healthy Kids
- Safe Food Handling for Food Donations

Health and Wellbeing Programming



Michigan State University Extension partnered with Hope Network and Mental Health Training Consultants to host Michigan's first **Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Instructor Summit**. The event brought together 80 instructors and coordinators from 26 counties to learn, network, and strengthen their teaching and administrative skills through presentations and breakout sessions led by experienced MHFA trainers.

Participants reported valuable learning opportunities, increased peer support, and **an 11% increase in confidence in teaching and coordinating MHFA**. The summit helped build a stronger statewide network of instructors, with the goal of expanding MHFA training across Michigan and better equipping families, workplaces, and communities to support mental health and wellness.

In a continued effort to manage physical and mental health in 2025, a total of **584 Kent County residents** found resources and benefited by participating in several MSU Extension health programs, with topics including:

- Building Resilience to Avoid Burnout
- Brief Practices in Mindfulness
- Changing Negative Self-Talk
- Chronic Pain PATH
- Diabetes Basics
- Keys to Embracing Aging
- RELAX: Alternatives to Anger
- Manejo Personal del Dolor crónico
- Mental Health First Aid
- Mindfulness for Better SLEEP
- SLEEP (Sleep Education for Everyone Program)
- Stress Less With Mindfulness
- Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention
- Teaching Kids Mindful Eating

Get Involved & Learn More!

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Programs

4-H & Youth

- 4-H Clubs
- 4-H Spin Clubs
- 4-H Capitol Experience
- Leadership Education
- 4-H Exploration Days
- 4-H Shooting Sports
- International Exchanges
- Adulting 101
- Career Preparation/Exploration/Development
- Cash Composition Contest & 4-H Money Smart Contests
- Skillathon
- Wild Spartans
- Summer Garden Programs
- World Food Prize
- Cloverbud Camps
- National 4-H Congress

Food & Health

- Changing Negative Self-Talk
- Cottage Food Law
- Food Preservation
- Food Safety Hotline
- Mindfulness Sessions
- Selling MI Honey & Maple Syrup
- Person Action Toward Health (PATH)
- Powerful Tools for Caregivers
- ServSafe
- Sleep Education
- Tai Chi, Matter of Balance for Arthritis & Falls Prevention
- Walk With Ease
- Keys to Embracing Aging
- Wits Workouts
- Safe Food = Healthy Kids
- Mental Health First Aid (Adult, Teen, Youth)
- Michigan Substance Use, Prevention, Education and Recovery (MiSUPER)

Family

- Homeownership Education
- Money Management
- Parenting Education
- RELAX: Alternatives to Anger
- Social & Emotional Health of Young Children
- Foreclosure Education & Counseling

Agriculture Related

- TelFarm
- Agritourism Education
- Beginning Farmer
- Beekeeping Programs & Education
- Cropland & Building Leasing
- Cultivating Local Farm Economics
- Estate & Farm Succession Planning
- Farm Business Organization & Structure
- Farm Financial Performance
- Farm Stress Management
- Field Crop Webinar Series
- Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market Expo
- Heroes to Hives
- Integrated Crop & Pest Management
- Grain Bin & Manure Pit Safety
- MI Ag Ideas to Grow With Conference
- Michigan CSA Network
- Michigan Manure Summit
- On-Farm Educator Visits
- Renewable Energy & Energy Conservation Education
- Virtual Breakfasts
- Christmas Tree Production Education
- Breakfast on the Farm
- Farm to Institution
- Virtual Coffee Break Podcast

Business & Community

- MSU Extension Product Center
- MSU Extension Citizen Planner Program
- New Commissioner Training
- Fiscally Ready Communities
- Veterans Services

Lawn & Garden

- Ask Extension
- Lawn & Garden Hotline
- Foundations of Gardening/MSU Extension Master Gardener Program
- Smart Gardening Soil Testing

Natural Resources

- Clean Boats, Clean Waters
- Introduction to Lakes Online
- Michigan Birding
- Algae 101
- Michigan Master Naturalist
- Michigan Paddle Stewards
- Wild About: Conservation Webinar Series
- Michigan Conservation Stewards
- Septic System Program
- Natural Shoreline Education

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