

VAN BUREN COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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Our Staff:

- Melissa Franklin, Office Manager
- Bill Darlington, Veterans Therapy Garden Worker
- Janice Zerbe, 4-H Extension Educator
- Krystal Avila, Community Nutrition Instructor
- Tyler Augst, Government & Community Vitality Educator



Message from the Interim District Director

Thank you for another great year of partnership and community impact! We appreciate your support in helping MSU Extension serve the residents of Van Buren County.
Sincerely, Kai Gritter.

Impact in Van Buren County



3,832 Participants from the County attended programs



381 youth enrolled in 4-H



777 county residents participated in health & nutrition programs



78 answered Ask Extension questions



Residents participated in **412** programs (across the State) and **135** programs (hosted in County)



155 MSU Extension Volunteers



367 participants in county agriculture programs



489 client consultations

4-H & Youth Development: Janice Zerbe, 4-H Extension Educator



Janice Zerbe,
4-H Extension Educator

Children and families of Van Buren County continued to benefit from a variety of programs in partnership with dedicated 4-H volunteers and MSU Extension staff. Topics included:

- Career exploration and workforce development
- Child & family development
- Healthy living
- Leadership & civic engagement
- Science literacy

14 4-H clubs
135 4-H Volunteers
381 4-H members
2,912 4-H youth participants

Ag Awareness Days 2024

Many young students today have limited opportunities to learn where their food comes from. Ag Awareness Days, held May 7–9, 2024, at the Van Buren Youth Fair, helped bridge that gap by engaging second graders from across Van Buren County in hands-on learning about agriculture—from production to consumption.

The event, organized by Van Buren County 4-H, Van Buren Tech Ag and Natural Resources/FFA, and the Van Buren County Farm Bureau, welcomed **937** students and **189** adults from 44 classes across 10 school districts. Forty-four teen volunteers guided the students through 14 interactive stations covering topics such as livestock, crops, machinery, and agricultural careers.

"Exposing students to all aspects of agriculture is important. It helps students make connections to their world." ~ Teacher



**Youth enjoying
Ag Awareness Days!**

Improving Recognition and Encouraging Gratitude Through Thank-You Notes

Van Buren County 4-H partnered with the Van Buren Youth Fair to introduce a new policy that required youth who received trophies, prizes, or sold animals to submit thank-you cards to auction buyers and trophy sponsors before receiving their checks. The fair board approved the policy, and Janice (pictured top left) managed the tracking process.

To support families, all registered participants received an email with helpful resources, including *The Seven Steps to a Great Thank-You Note* and envelope-addressing tips. Thank-you cards and stamps were also available for purchase. By the 10 p.m. deadline on the final day of the fair, **687 thank-you notes** had been crafted and were ready to be mailed! **This initiative is helping youth build useful life skills and strengthening community connections.**



**Beyond
Ready**



Family Time Trying New Healthy Treats

In 2024, Krystal partnered with the Hartford Library to launch a parent-child cooking series. The first class was designed to spark interest and gather feedback to tailor the program based on community need and response. A total of 12 parents attended that session and brought one to three children, each.

To accommodate the range of ages and skill levels, Krystal chose a simple parfait recipe for families to make. The children used shape cutters to create fun fruit designs, and parents encouraged them to try new foods by referring to them playfully, like calling cantaloupe an “orange duck” or watermelon a “red flower.”

One youth participant initially said they didn't like cranberries or coconut, but after tasting their finished recipe, they exclaimed, 'Cranberries and coconut are delicious!'

The creative approaches used during the session helped many hesitant children try and enjoy new fruits, often surprising their parents. Some kids even asked for seconds, taking bites from their parents' portions! Word about the positive experience quickly spread. For the next session, each parent brought a friend and their children, **doubling attendance**. Due to limited space, the group was split into two sessions—an encouraging sign of growing interest and community engagement.

Promoting Health & Wellbeing

In 2024, MSU Extension Educators provided a variety of health programs to **76** Van Buren residents, on topics including:

- ❖ *Adverse Childhood Experiences* - presented to Van Buren County's child protective service workers.
- ❖ *Mental Health First Aid* - for Van Buren Intermediate School District staff.
- ❖ *Changing Negative Self-talk, Calming Down & De-stressing, Mindfulness in the Workplace*, and *Forgiving & Letting Go of the Past* - as springtime Lunch & Learn webinars.
- ❖ *Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention* - offered at the Vanderlyn Community Center in Hartford.

Through education, outreach, and practical, evidence-based resources, we empower individuals and families to improve their well-being—from helping older adults stay active, to guiding parents in raising healthy eaters, to supporting farmers in managing stress.

777 Van Buren County residents participated in health and nutrition programs in 2024.

20 Van Buren County residents were impacted by a site receiving nutrition or physical activity Policy, System, or Environmental (PSE) education.

For additional success stories, access to events, classes, articles, health resources, podcasts, and more, please explore:

https://www.canr.msu.edu/food_health
or scan the QR code:



Community, Food & Environment: Tyler Augst, Extension Educator



Tyler Augst, Government & Community Vitality Educator

Governing Essentials

In January, many Michiganders started their terms as elected or appointed officials in our local units of government. To help prepare local officials for their service, MSU Extension brought the popular *Governing Essentials* program to Hartford, MI, with **28** Van Buren County residents in attendance.

Governing Essentials is a program designed for local elected and appointed officials who are looking to sharpen their skills and promote good governance practices.

The program aims to cultivate a basic understanding of transparent, efficient and impactful governance practices across three topics: Navigating the Open Meetings Act, Mastering Parliamentary Procedure with Robert's Rules of Order, and the Components of Extraordinary Governance. Participants attending this program acquired the tools needed to navigate complexities, foster transparency and effect positive change.

"I learned what is and isn't my role and the how-tos of running a governmental meeting, which differs from the private sector."~ Program Participant

Citizen Planner

Thirty-four Van Buren County residents completed the *Citizen Planner* Program, which offers land use education for locally appointed and elected planning officials and interested residents throughout Michigan. This non-credit course leads to a certificate of completion awarded by MSU Extension. Advanced training through the Master Citizen Planner (MCP) credential is also available.

The Citizen Planner Program is offered in a classroom or via video conference setting, or through a convenient self-paced opportunity called Citizen Planner Online which covers the following subjects: Understanding the Planning and Zoning Context, Planning for the Future of Your Community, Implementing the Plan with Zoning, Making Zoning Decisions, Using Innovative Planning and Zoning, and Successfully Fulfilling Your Role.

Communicating Through Conflict

It is especially important in today's polarized society and stressful workplaces to develop and maintain positive relationships by gaining skills to handle conflict competently. **Forty-seven** Van Buren County residents attended the two-hour interactive *Communicating through Conflict* workshops which provide participants with tools and techniques to handle situations and interpersonal conflict more effectively.

To access all Community, Food, and Environment programs and resources, explore: <https://www.canr.msu.edu/community>

Agriculture & Agribusiness:

MSU Extension Awarded \$151K for the Veterans Therapy Garden!

In 2024, MSU Extension received a \$151,000 Michigan Community Center grant as part of Governor Whitmer's *Make it in Michigan* strategy to support people, projects and revitalize places. The grant, awarded to 69 non-profits, 22 local governments, and nine educational institutions, will fund improvements to the Veterans Therapy Garden, which is located in Paw Paw, MI.

The project aims to align the garden with professional standards while supporting veterans and the broader community through horticultural therapy. It also creates educational opportunities for residents pursuing careers in horticulture, and offers a replicable infrastructure model, that can be shared widely.

Key improvements include ADA-compliant walkways, low-float irrigation, deer fencing, a renewable-energy greenhouse heater, and a solar-powered utility system. The project prioritizes veteran-owned vendors. Upon completion, best practices and design recommendations will be published and shared with organizations such as VA centers, hospitals, schools, and community groups. All grant-funded work is expected to conclude by June 2026.



Entrance to the **Veterans Therapy Garden**
(801 Hazen St. Paw Paw, MI)



Cheyenne Sloan, Extension Blueberry and Small Fruit Educator, is deep in the trench discussing soil composition at the Viticulture Field Day.

Michigan Viticulture Field Day

The Great Lakes grape-growing community gathered once again for the 35th annual Michigan Viticulture Field Day on July 31, 2024, at the Southwest Michigan Research and Extension Center. As the region's longest-running educational event focused on grapes and wine, it featured hands-on demonstrations, the latest precision viticulture technology, and insights from local scientific research.

Industry partners showcased cutting-edge equipment, while attendees enjoyed the event's signature steak cookout and Michigan wine tasting—an annual favorite.

Christmas Tree Meeting in July!

Over 220 growers attended the Michigan Christmas Tree Association (MCTA) summer meeting at Wahmhoff Farms in Gobles, MI. Participants gained valuable knowledge to improve practices, impacting 2,990 acres worth of Christmas tree production. Many plan to enhance their weed management practices and overall farm operations. One attendee shared, "Very good farm tours and research updates—great program!"



MSU Extension's Statewide Impact

Helping people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of Michigan State University directly to individuals, communities and businesses.



\$246.5 billion annual impact of food and agriculture on Michigan's economy



29,264,562 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts



133,306 total youth participants



12,861 total volunteers



9,808 people participated in Food Safety programs including ServSafe®

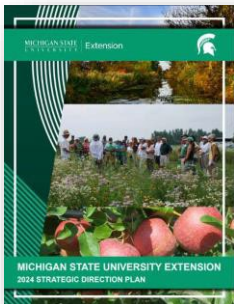


67,320 Participants in Community, Food and Environment Programs

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION



1,876 Extension Master Gardener (EMG) spent 96,653 hours helping individuals and communities grow



In 2024, MSU Extension completed a comprehensive Strategic Direction Plan, which illustrates our vision for the future, outlining strengths to build on and opportunities to embrace. To read the full report, go to canr.msu.edu/od/directors_office/strategic-direction or scan the QR code.



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