



"Thank you for another great programming year! We couldn't do our work for the residents of Van Buren County without your continued partnership!"

--- Julie Pioch, District 13 Director

Gloves Off activity during Kids Day at the 2023 Van Buren Youth Fair. This Michigan Vaccine Project activity demonstrated the basics of how to properly remove PPE or rubber gloves while using shaving cream as the contaminant. Youth visited stations at this annual educational event and took part in the activities to get their free wristbands for rides.



Van Buren County Based Staff

Chris Imler, Horticulture/Veterans Educator
Janice Zerbe, Children & Youth Educator
Tyler Augst, Gov't & Community Vitality Educator
Krystal Avila, Community Nutrition Instructor
Cheyenne Sloan, Small Fruit Educator
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**Van Buren County
General Fund Appropriations**

2021 \$271,691
2022 \$280,990
2023 \$288,378

397

EXTENSION PROGRAMS INCLUDED VAN BUREN COUNTY RESIDENTS

3849

COUNTY RESIDENTS ATTENDED EXTENSION PROGRAMS

135

PROGRAMS HELD IN THE COUNTY

296

DIRECT CONSULTATIONS REPORTED

**VAN BUREN COUNTY
MSU EXTENSION WEBSITE**

29,438 PAGE VIEWS
8,772 VISITORS
15% REGULAR CONSUMERS

371 4-H Youth Enrolled

126 Adult Volunteers

14 Community Clubs

4309 Total Youth Reached



**24 Residential Soil Tests
76 Commercial Soil Tests**

**258 Youth Reached via
SNAP Nutrition Education**

54 "ASK EXTENSION" Questions



**11 Van Buren Extension
Master Gardeners**



Health Programming Reaches Nearly 300 in Southwest Michigan

"It's so easy to feel stuck and tired with chronic illness. You have helped me to improve my life."

--- Chronic Pain PATH Participant

Being healthy means tending to our unique physical health needs, however that takes shape. Whether practicing tai chi in a sunny park or ensuring our immunizations are up to date, we can improve our physical health by managing chronic conditions, preventing injury and illness, and embracing joyful movement to the best of our abilities.

Social-emotional and mental health is also key. We can care for this part of our health in a multitude of ways, from practicing mindfulness to learning how to support someone in a mental health crisis. This allows us to cope with negative situations and feelings, foster strong and healthy relationships with others and ourselves, and live with purpose and meaning.

MSU Extension is here to support all the ways we can live healthier lives and build healthier communities, by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses.

In 2023, nearly 300 residents from Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, and Van Buren Counties participated in health and food safety programming including Stress Less with Mindfulness, Personal Action Toward Health (PATH), RELAX Alternatives to Anger, Home Food Preservation, Safe Food = Healthy Kids, the Michigan Vaccine Project, A Matter of Balance, and Sleep Education for Everyone (SLEEP) just to name a few.

Covert Township Keyhole Development

Educator Tyler Augst attended the April 19th, 2023 meeting of the Covert Township Planning Commission. At this meeting, the Planning Commission began a discussion of approaches to regulating keyhole development for waterfront access in the community. As part of the Planning Commission's packet the planning consultant included the December 21, 2015 MSU Extension article "Regulating Keyhole Development" written by Senior Educator Brad Neumann as a background information piece as the Planning considered whether they would like to add some form of keyhole development regulation in their ordinance.

After a discussion, the Planning Commission agreed to add researching and possibly recommending a keyhole development ordinance to their plan of work for the year ahead. During that discussion, points from the article were raised such as frontage-based standards and the carrying capacity of a body of water.



2023 Great Lakes Expo

"I cannot say enough good things about this conference. The presence of University information and education (understandable for growers) combined with the industry resources is unmatched for the horticulture industry anywhere else."

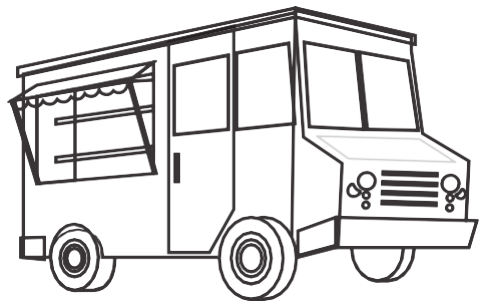
--- GLEXPO Participant

The Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO, Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO (GLEXPO), and Lavender Conference is an annual event that draws thousands of farmers from Michigan and beyond to the DeVos Place Convention Center in Grand Rapids each December.

Attendees included fruit growers, vegetable growers, fruit and vegetable growers, and greenhouse growers with 142 attendees from Van Buren County. In 2023, the multi-day event had nearly 3,200 attendees in more than 90 educational sessions and workshops with sessions on specialty crops, greenhouses, and farm marketing.

MSU Extension's team of vegetable, fruit, greenhouse, and community food system educators and specialists organized 77 out of 96 recorded educational activities offered. The 2023 show offered 54 Michigan Restricted Use Pesticide (RUP) credits, 47.5 Ohio RUP credits, and 100.5 Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) continuing education credits.

Organizers also put together two separate bus tours in conjunction with GLEXPO. The Farm Market Bus had 152 participants on three buses visiting six farm markets and agritourism operations to the east and northeast of Grand Rapids. The Greenhouse Biological Control Essentials: Setting Yourself Up for Success Workshop and Bus Tour visited Walters Gardens in Zeeland.



How to Start a Food Truck Business – Southwest Michigan Entrepreneurs Want to Know

In 2023, the How to Start a Food Business online course was designed for entrepreneurs considering starting a food truck or mobile food business in Michigan.

Each module walks through the process of developing a business plan based on the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) business plan template, developing a menu, selecting a food truck, trailer, or cart, writing a marketing plan, and identifying your target customers and competitors as well as Michigan’s Mobile Unit and Special Transitory Food Unit (STFU) licensing processes.

This free, self-paced course was developed by Michigan State University (MSU) Extension and the MSU Product Center in partnership with the Grand Rapids Food Truck Association, GROW, Prep Space and the Kent County Health Department.

To earn a certificate of completion, participants must earn a 100% score on all nine quizzes.

Of the 246 participants who attended throughout the state, 18 attended from Berrien, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren Counties.



MSU Extension Supports Van Buren County Planning Commission

In 2023, the retirement of a long-time staff member to the Van Buren County Planning Commission, as well as other personnel changes in the county, created a situation for limited capacity in the county to have staff present at the Planning Commission meetings. Tyler Augst worked with Jan Petersen, Van Buren Planning Commission Chair to get the commission some assistance. Augst shared Extension resources and attended the March meeting of the Planning Commission to connect the Planning Commission to training and answer questions.

Mindfulness Matters Especially in the Classroom



One of the Michigan Department of Education’s primary goals as outlined in the state's strategic education plan is to support the health, safety, and wellness of all students. This is done through social-emotional learning.

Using lessons from Mindful Me: A 4-H Primary Mindfulness Curriculum, Van Buren County was able to teach youth about breathing to relax/calm down, their emotions/feelings and helping to make others feel appreciated.

Throughout 2023 Mindfulness was taught in four Van Buren County school districts and the South Haven Memorial Library. Nearly 600 youth were taught totaling 43.5 contact hours of instruction.

Some teachers now reach out to request the lessons instead of MSU Extension staff contacting them. Many teachers have shared how students have responded to lessons in positive ways. Here is just one example:

"Last week we had a lesson about taking out of someone's bucket. I have a student who really struggles with his emotions and behavior. Almost three to four times a week he would flip his desk, throw all his items. Last week, not one outburst. His bucket was here all week and so was mine, we talked about how sometimes his behavior would dip into my bucket and that it hurt my heart when he reached into my bucket. He really understood that and everyday last week he told me each morning that he was not going to reach or take out of my bucket. He was going to try really hard and behave, he did! Five days in a row of controlling himself and he really saw that his classmates added to his bucket too because they were proud of him for not hurting our learning time."

- Van Buren County Elementary Teacher

Augst was then invited back by Chair Petersen to the May and June Van Buren Planning Commission meetings to share ideas and consult with the Commission. At these meetings, the opportunity to provide an in-person Citizen Planner program to Van Buren County in the spring of 2024 was launched. During the meeting, the Van Buren Planning Commission was also reviewing a zoning ordinance amendment from a local unit of government where Augst continued to provide support.

Michigan's First Veterans Therapy Garden Project

In about an acre of space behind the Van Buren County offices located at 801 Hazen Street in Paw Paw, Michigan, is a carefully curated garden vibrant with activity since March of 2022. Michigan's first Veterans Therapy Garden Project is



designed to support veterans and the general public with therapeutic horticulture services and spaces. It offers educational opportunities for residents pursuing careers in the horticulture industry.

The Veterans Therapy Garden Project is led by MSU Extension Consumer and Veterans Horticulture Educator Chris Imler, in coordination with the Van Buren County Veterans Service Office, the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency and MSU Extension's statewide Veteran Outreach team. In addition, a team of volunteers from MSU Extension Master Gardeners of Southwest Michigan provide support to ensure the garden is expertly maintained and continues to meet rigorous quality standards upon its completion.



Veterans and their families are subject to whole health stressors that make their lives uniquely challenging. Engaging in horticulture through evidence-based practice and education is a proven method for addressing those challenges and improving the quality of life in the entire family unit. Program participants through the Battle Creek VA Medical center are an especially impactful group services are delivered to. One hundred percent of this subset of participants are inpatients of the medical center, which means that these individuals have already been identified as experiencing significant health challenges.

Horticulture therapy education services are delivered through multiple methods. The Veterans Therapy Garden Project is an education tool that allows participants to take an active, self-paced role in their recovery and resiliency building. Classes are taught as a structured, 8-week program that emphasizes both hands-on horticulture and applied mental health skill development.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2020 that demand for mental healthcare had drastically increased both over the last 10 years and especially within the last three years. Availability of these services has not increased proportionally and has not been projected to meet or exceed demand past 2025. For many military veterans, this disparity in mental health services is often even more pronounced. Finding quality mental health resources can be a critical problem for veterans returning to civilian life.

Whether it's dealing with gaps in the VA healthcare system or financial barriers, too many veterans are unable to access the care they need. The MSU Extension Veterans Therapy Garden Project addresses the unique mental, emotional, and physical healthcare challenges of former military service members by establishing spaces and services which support evidence-based horticulture therapy.

In 2023, there were almost 3000 visits to the garden. Visitors included volunteers, veterans and class participants. The garden was also established as a satellite site for the Heroes to Hives program. A wheelchair-accessible raised-bed was designed for use by an active garden participant.



Celebrating its first Veterans Day event, Saturday, November 11, 2023, the Veterans Therapy Garden Project hosted more than 40 volunteers, participants and area leaders. With its primary goals of acknowledging the veteran community in Southwest Michigan and highlighting the work of MSU Extension for veterans, the Veterans Day event also provided networking opportunities for area veterans to meet outreach workers, learn about relevant resources and provide feedback about veterans services.

In addition to veterans therapy garden volunteers, attendees included MSU Extension Director Quentin Tyler, Van Buren Commissioners and members of the nearby VFW and American Legion. All enjoyed the catered event and entertainment by local musicians.



"We're hoping to make this an annual event to bring attention to individuals pursuing their recovery or resilience-building goals, and to demonstrate what MSU Extension is doing for our Southwest Michigan veterans," Chris Imler, MSU Extension Veterans Liaison said. An active-duty veteran of the U.S. Airforce, Imler reported, "People were pleasantly surprised that they have access to this resource and are excited to participate in the garden in the next growing season."

Imler applied for a Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity grant to improve the accessibility of the Veterans Therapy Garden Project and was awarded \$151,000 from the Michigan Community Center grant. The main purpose of the MCC grant funding is to bring the Veterans Therapy Garden Project in Paw Paw in line with professional and commercial standards for public gardens and develop a replicable infrastructure template that can be shared.

Grow the Trees not the Weeds!

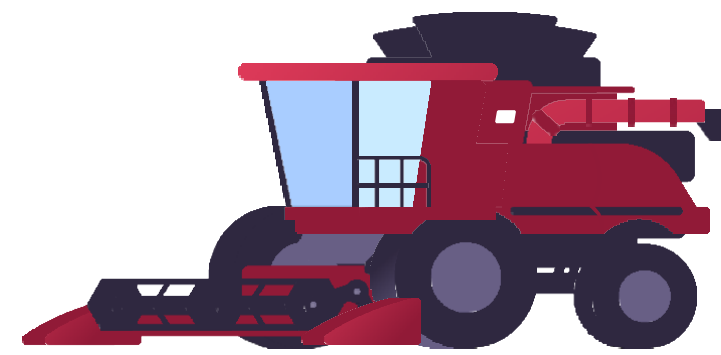
The MSU Christmas tree field day event “Grow the trees, not the weeds” had 43 people register, with 32 growers from Michigan and 11 growers from outside of the state, representing a total of 1,800 acres of Christmas tree production.

The MSU Extension field day event at Wamhoff Farms in Gobles last July gave demonstrations on weed identification and management and a pruning and shearing demonstration. Weed management is critical for tree establishment and participants learned how to identify what weed species are present as well as how best to control them. Pruning and shearing decisions greatly impact the value of trees at harvest and participants learned pruning and shearing strategies in pine, spruce, and fir trees

From those surveyed 95% had improved knowledge of how-to identifying weeds and 85% had improved knowledge of weed control solutions. Ninety percent had improved knowledge on why shearing/pruning is needed and 95% had improved knowledge of pruning techniques.

For those surveyed, all said they would make management changes over the next year. Ninety-five percent said they would change how they identify weeds at their farm and 90% would change weed control strategies.

This event provided producers with an opportunity to better identify weeds at their farm. In addition, discussion of when, why, and how to prune trees. Growers then were able to see field demonstrations of these principles.



Ag Awareness Day in Van Buren Reaches 766 Second Graders

Many youth today do not know where their food comes from and think it just appears on the grocery shelves. Ag education teaches youth about production to consumption. Ag Awareness Days is a program offered to second grade classes in Van Buren County. After a three year break, Ag Awareness Days was back! In 2023, there were eight schools with 37 classrooms who attended the event that is a partnership between Van Buren County 4-H, the Van Buren Tech Ag and Natural Resources/FFA and Van Buren County Farm Bureau.

Upon arrival, each class was assigned to a teen who lead them from station to station. There were 14 stations (each station had 1-2 FFA students assigned to it) that ranged from animals to a combine to fruit to careers. The youth also potted a tomato plant that they were able to take home with them along with a goodie bag. At the stations with animals, the youth had the opportunity to pet the animal as well as learn about the animal.

Attendance in 2023:

- 8 school districts/37 classrooms
- 766 second graders
- 174 adults
- 44 FFA students
- 10 adult volunteers

The program will continue to educate Van Buren County youth where agriculture is thriving.

Teacher comments:

"I loved the information that was presented by students to our younger generations that was developmentally appropriate and timed well for them to not lose interest."

"Introducing students to agriculture--not many students know about the crops and/or animals and growing up doing 4-H is quite important to kids these days."