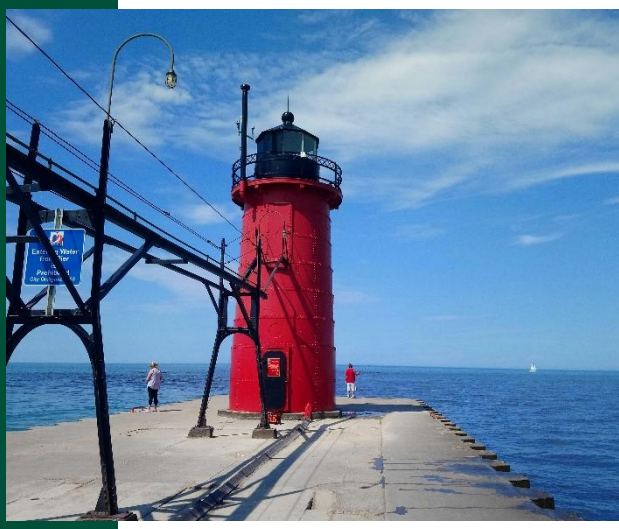
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

VAN BUREN COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2025



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Our Staff:

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



Message from Kai Gritter, Interim District Director

In 2025, MSU Extension in Van Buren County advanced agriculture, youth development, and community education through strong partnerships and responsive programming. Highlights included producer education, 4-H engagement, and local government training. These efforts reflect dedicated staff and collaboration. We thank Van Buren County partners and stakeholders for their continued support.

Impact in Van Buren County

3,736 Participants from the County attended programs

Residents participated in **434** programs (across the State) and **115** programs (hosted in County)

371 4-H Enrolled Youth

156 MSU Extension Volunteers

1,019 County residents participated in health & nutrition programs

479 Participants in County agriculture programs

40 Answered Ask Extension Questions

513 Client Consultations

4-H & Youth Development:



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
141 4-H Volunteers
371 4-H Members
2,479 4-H youth participants

Ag Awareness Days 2025

Ag Awareness Days 2025 transformed how Van Buren County second graders understood food and farming. Over two days at the Van Buren County Youth Fair, **698 students from eight school districts and 34 classes** explored 14 hands-on stations led by **43 FFA teens and 21 4-H volunteers.**



Youth enjoying Ag Awareness Days

Students learned about (and petted) animals, examined combine equipment, planted tomato seedlings (which they took home), and discovered agricultural careers! Collaboration among 4-H, FFA, Farm Bureau, and volunteers ensured a successful event.

Teachers reported increased curiosity, vocabulary, and willingness to try new foods, demonstrating lasting impact on agricultural literacy and community engagement!

"The students gain valuable information about the area in which they live. They learn the origin of the food they eat. They are later willing to try new foods." -Teacher

Mindfulness That Sticks: Early Lessons, Lasting Impact

Janice Zerbe delivered *Mindful Me*, a research-based 4-H curriculum, to kindergarten students in Decatur, teaching mindfulness through stories and hands-on activities.

Lessons on mood management, kindness, and emotional awareness equipped youth with practical strategies like deep breathing, affirmations, and expressing feelings. Teachers and families observed students applying these skills beyond the classroom, strengthening emotional well-being.

This effort advanced 4-H's mission to prepare youth with essential life skills for lifelong success!

4-H & Youth Development:

STEM in Action: Big Discoveries, Bright Moments

In 2025, Janice Zerbe delivered three STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) lessons to Mattawan Young 5 students, building problem-solving skills through hands-on learning.

Youth explored chemical reactions with fizzy apple art, discovered solid-liquid properties using Oobleck, and engineered catapults to test force and distance. Students made real-world connections and adjusted designs to improve results. These engaging experiences sparked curiosity and confidence, advancing Michigan 4-H's mission to prepare youth with critical thinking and life skills needed for future success.



Creating catapults with Mrs. Zerbe!

Raising the Standard: Building Responsible Youth in Animal Agriculture

Janice delivered **14** Youth for the Quality Care of Animals (YQCA) sessions, reaching **321 Van Buren County youth** in 2025. YQCA is a national, multi-species quality assurance program, focused on three pillars: food safety, animal well-being, & character development.

Spanning a range of food production species, the program highlights 10 key production practices and includes species-specific information on pigs, beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep, goats, market rabbits, and poultry.

Sessions were held at locations across Van Buren County, including the MSU Extension office, ISD Conference Center, and Technology Center. **This annual initiative continues to strengthen youth knowledge and responsibility in animal agriculture.**

Exciting New Partnership!

A new partnership with **Youth Development Company** (**YDC**) expanded summer learning for Van Buren County youth. Janice Zerbe delivered five weeks of programming to **over sixty** K–8 students in Gobles and South Haven. Sessions included:

- Mindfulness activities, e.g., creating calming jars and mindful eating
- Science-related activities, e.g., paper rockets and bee bots!
- Financial literacy and job skills, e.g., budgeting and check writing

The sessions engaged student learners while extending 4-H programming and life skill development to new friends and communities.

Be Safe • Be Kind • Be Respectful
YDC

Agriculture & Agribusiness:



SW Michigan Seed Treatment Workshop

Nicolle Ritchie, Field Crops Educator (pictured left), helped coordinate the 2025 Seed Treatment Workshop at the Van Buren County MSU Extension office. The workshop included the following topics:

- Rate and Application Calculations
- Equipment Maintenance and Calibration
- Nematode Management
- Soybean Biological Treatments
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- Pesticide and Seed Storage/Disposal

Participants gained practical knowledge to improve safety, efficiency, and crop outcomes. The workshop also offered Restricted Use Pesticide (RUP) and Certified Crop Advisers (CCA) credits, supporting continued professional development and strengthening informed decision-making in seed treatment practices.

MSU Extension's regional agricultural expertise gained national visibility through an Associated Press spotlight on weather-related challenges to corn pollination. Field Crops Educator Nicolle Ritchie provided research-based expertise while working directly with area farmers, with photography highlighting a Paw Paw farm. The story's national distribution demonstrated MSU Extension's value as a trusted source of timely agricultural information while elevating the organization's visibility and showcasing the expertise and impact of Extension professionals serving southwest Michigan.

Southwest Michigan Integrated Crop and Pest Management (SW MI ICPM) Update

Participants in the Crop and Pest Management Update Meetings heard from MSU Extension educators and specialists on the latest recommendations for managing weeds, diseases, insects, and nematodes. Attendees also received the updated E-434, "Weed Control Guide for Field Crops." These regional meetings brought MSU research and expertise directly to southwest Michigan, translating statewide recommendations into practical, locally relevant strategies addressing the conditions and challenges faced by growers across the region.



Speakers included Nicolle Ritchie, Jon LaPorte, Erin Burns, Christy Sprague, Chris DiFonzo, Marty Chilvers, and Dennis Pennington.

For more from MSU Extension's Field Crops team, explore https://www.canr.msu.edu/field_crops

Agriculture & Agribusiness:

Beyond the Bin Grain Marketing Workshop



Jon LaPorte, Farm Business Management Educator

Sixteen producers from four Michigan counties, representing nearly 49,855 acres, attended the *Beyond the Bin: Grain Marketing Workshop* in December at the Van Buren County MSU Extension Office to strengthen their grain marketing skills. Participants learned core concepts such as goal setting, price targets, and decision deadlines, along with an integrated pest management session that emphasized return on investment (ROI) and how production costs affect target grain prices.

The program was developed in response to an informal needs assessment conducted with a five-member Southwest Michigan grower advisory group, which identified marketing and budgeting as priority needs, and was offered at no cost thanks to funding from Project GREEEN.



***Christine Charles**, Regenerative Ag Educator, demonstrates water retention of different land-use soils using the Rainfall Simulator.*

Third Annual Field Day

In September, the Long-Term Agroecosystem Research (LTAR) program at the W.K. Kellogg Biological Station (KBS) in Hickory Corners welcomed over 140 participants including farmers, agriculture and conservation professionals, researchers, and community members to its third annual Field Day. Over half of the participants were new to the KBS LTAR, and the other half were return participants. The event highlighted current research, innovative tools, and real-world applications for building resilient and profitable agricultural systems.

It was a great event; I made some good connections and learned a lot. - Participant

GLEXPO Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO

The Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable & Farm Market EXPO (GLEXPO) is an annual event that draws thousands of farmers from Michigan and beyond to Grand Rapids, Michigan, each December.

Michigan State University Extension educators are heavily involved in coordinating the educational offerings for this event. Producers connected with over 4,500 fruit, vegetable, farm market and greenhouse individuals and over 400 industry-leading companies. More than **95 attendees** from Van Buren County learned how to implement the newest innovations on their farms.

Community, Food & Environment:



Tyler Augst, Government & Community Vitality Educator

Citizen Planner Series

In March 2025, Tyler Augst (pictured left) received an email from a participant who had attended a Citizen Planner program hosted in Van Buren County several months earlier. The participant enrolled to better understand local planning processes and how to engage constructively in community discussions around a local noise concern. Applying concepts learned through the program, the participant worked collaboratively with the planning commission and township board, contributing to the adoption of a noise ordinance designed to balance the community's rural character with residents' needs.

Reflecting on the experience, the participant wrote: *"That happened in large part because of the guidance and inspiration I gained in the Citizen Planner series. Thank you!"*

287 Van Buren County residents attended **80** Community, Food & Environment (CFEI) Programs in 2025

CFEI Program topics that interested Van Buren County Residents in 2025:

- Center for Lakes and Streams
- Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS)
- Financial Homeownership Education
- Government and Community Vitality
- Product Center
- Sea Grant
- Woods and Wildlife Conservation

Did You Know?

Making IT in Michigan! A couple participants from Van Buren County attended the 16th annual Making It In Michigan (MIIM) Conference and Trade Show held at the Lansing Center in Lansing, Michigan, on May 7, 2025. The event featured dynamic educational panels, buyer-supplier events, and a pitch competition. Additionally, the Trade Show featured over 115 Michigan-based food vendors, many of which are Michigan State University Product Center clients.

MSU Product Center: MSU Extension and the MSU Product Center assist entrepreneurs and businesses to develop 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.

For Community, Food, and Environment programs and resources, explore: **https://www.canr.msu.edu/community**

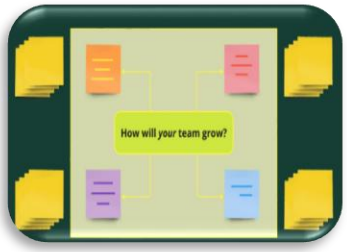
Community, Food & Environment:

Stronger Conversations, Smarter Plans: Building Resilient Teams

MSU Extension strengthened individual and organizational effectiveness through two interactive programs focused on communication and planning.

In the *Communicating through Conflict* workshop, hosted in Hartford, MI, participants developed skills to manage difficult conversations, reduce stress responses, and practice active listening for more productive dialogue.

The two-day *Setting Group Goals for Growth (SG3)* workshop, held in South Haven, MI, guided a team through a structured visioning process, helping them identify shared priorities and develop clear strategies for future action. Participants engaged in hands-on activities that encouraged collaboration, reflection, and practical application.



These programs equipped Van Buren County residents with tools to navigate challenges, strengthen relationships, and plan effectively. **By enhancing both interpersonal communication and strategic direction, MSU Extension helped build stronger organizations and more resilient communities.**

Reduce Invasive Pet and Plant Escapes (RIPPLE)

MSU Extension's Center for Lakes and Streams team partnered with **Great Lakes Pondscapes**, based in Paw Paw, MI in 2025. Extension Educators engaged 20 Aquascape pond contractors, discussing aquatic invasive species and the **RIPPLE** program, which promotes proper disposal of aquatic plants and animals to protect waterways.

With RIPPLE, participants can learn to identify invasive species such as yellow floating heart and parrot feather and better understand their environmental impact.

By increasing awareness and prevention practices, the session empowered contractors to play a **key role** in protecting Michigan's waterways and reducing the spread of invasive species.



For informative RIPPLE educational materials, go to
https://www.canr.msu.edu/invasive_species/ripple/RIPPLE-Materials/ripple-materials

Health & Nutrition:

Finding New Ways to Play



Red Wood Elementary partnered with MSU Extension's SNAP-Ed funded Community Nutrition Instructor, **Krystal Avila**, to implement a Policy System and Environment (PSE) strategy to select new playground equipment by engaging students directly. After receiving ideas from staff and student council members, Krystal recommended a field day where students could try various activities and provide feedback. Each grade rotated through five activity stations led by the student council.



This encouraged full participation, resulting in high student engagement and continued independent play the following day. Staff observed increased physical activity, improved classroom readiness, and new ways to use existing equipment! They plan to incorporate these activities, particularly frisbee golf, more intentionally into their curriculum.

Small Changes, Lasting Health: Building Better Habits Together

Yolanda Thrash, a Community Nutrition Instructor funded by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) delivered a six-week Healthy Food, Healthy Families class at the **We Care Community Resource Center** in South Haven for a multicultural adult audience.



Participants learned practical nutrition and wellness strategies, including building meals with more vegetables. During a hands-on cooking session, they prepared veggie spaghetti with zucchini noodles and plant-based ingredients, many trying it for the first time.

The program also encouraged daily physical activity. One couple reported replacing short car trips with regular walks, demonstrating meaningful behavior change!

Special Note: For over 30 years, MSU Extension's SNAP-Ed staff delivered evidence-based, hands-on nutrition and physical activity learning opportunities that empowered youth and adults to build healthy eating habits and to be more active on a limited budget. Following a federal decision to end funding, the program was discontinued after July 4, 2025.

2025 Fast Facts Statewide:

66,592 residents participated in health and nutrition programs.
3,045 health programs were delivered by MSU Extension, either in person or virtually.
409 sites received nutrition or physical activity Policy, System, or Environmental education (PSE)

Health & Nutrition:



Food Safety instructor, **Kellie Jordan** (pictured left), expanded safe food practices in Van Buren County by reaching **71** participants through hands-on and classroom training. In partnership with Van Buren District Library, she facilitated a four-part Food Preservation Series during the summer.

Topics ranged from introducing home food preservation, water bath and pressure canning, to pickling and applesauce sessions!

Additionally, 14 VFW volunteers in Decatur, MI completed a four-hour ServSafe Food Handler course, strengthening safe food handling for community events. These efforts increased confidence, reduced food safety risks, and supported healthier communities.

Promoting Health & Wellbeing

In 2025, MSU Extension Educators provided a variety of health programs to **1,019 Van Buren County residents,** on topics including:

- *Changing Negative Self-talk, Calming Down & De-stressing, Mindfulness in the Workplace,* and *Forgiving & Letting Go of the Past* as **Lunch & Learn webinars**.
- *Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention* - offered at the **Vanderlyn Community Center** in Hartford, MI.
- *Tai Chi for Better Sleep* offered at the **Carnegie Library** in Paw Paw, MI.

Did You Know?

MSU Extension has an innovative referral system (extension.msu.edu/healthprograms) that connects people to the following FREE online health programs:

- **Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention**
- **A Matter of Balance**
- **Mindfulness for Better Living**
- **Stress Less with Mindfulness**
- **RELAX: Alternatives to Anger**
- **Chronic Disease/Pain/Diabetes PATH**
- **Walk with Ease**
- **Sleep Education for Everyone (SLEEP)**
- **Mindfulness for Better Sleep**
- **Tai Chi for Better Sleep**

Get Involved & Learn More!

Visit our Food and Health website (canr.msu.edu/food_health)

Subscribe to our curated email news digests (bit.ly/MSUEdigest) **customized to your exact interests**
Choose from 75+ topics!

Need a healthy recipe for dinner tonight?
Explore recipes by scanning the QR code

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.

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

206,346,096 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts

133,301 total youth participants

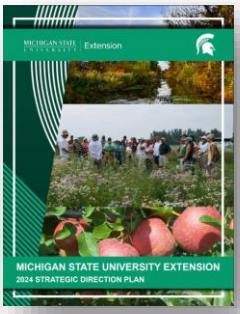
13,660 total volunteers

11,944 people participated in Food Safety programs including ServSafe®

72,517 Participants in Community, Food and Environment Programs

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

1,998 Extension Master Gardeners (EMG) spent 119,864 hours helping individuals and communities grow



MSU Extension recently 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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