



VAN BUREN COUNTY 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

MESSAGE FROM THE DISTRICT DIRECTOR



Despite the ongoing pandemic of 2021, Michigan State University Extension continued to work for Van Buren County youth, adults, businesses and communities providing outstanding research-based education and community development programs.

With the learning curve of on-line programming behind us, we continued to expand and perfect our digital educational offerings.

Considering the health and safety of participants, many of our face-to-face programs provided both an in-person and remote option to participate. Our educators found creative ways to offer outdoor programs and engage with schools

and community groups while maintaining social distancing.

This report highlights only some of the accomplishments of 2021. Be sure to take a glance at the appendix also provided to see the breadth of programs that your county residents attended.

Please reach out to me or anyone from MSU Extension with ideas for programs, contacts for new partners or feedback on our work. It takes all of us to bring the best programming to the district.

Thank you for your continued partnership and support of MSU Extension in the county.

Julie Pioch, District 13 Director

VAN BUREN STAFF

Tyler Augst

Government & Community Vitality Educator

augsttyl@msu.edu

Krystal Avila

Community Nutrition Instructor

avilakry@msu.edu

Melissa Franklin

Office Manager

frank126@msu.edu

Christopher Imler

Consumer Horticulture & Veteran Liaison Educator

imlerchr@msu.edu

Bruce Mackellar

Agriculture & Agribusiness Educator

mackelb@msu.edu

Cheyenne Sloan

Small Fruit Educator

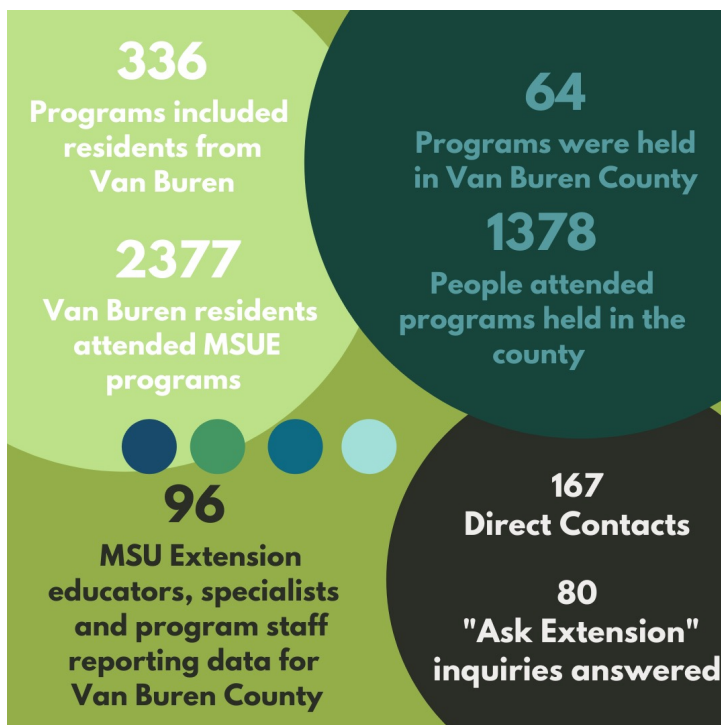
sloanche@msu.edu

Janice Zerbe

4-H Youth Development Educator

razjerj@msu.edu

BY THE NUMBERS



VAN BUREN COUNTY GENERAL FUND APPROPRIATION

2019 \$266,964
2020 \$249,439
2021 \$253,387

CONTACT US

MSU Extension – Van Buren County
801 Hazen St. Suite D
Paw Paw MI 49079
269-657-8213
msue.vanburen@county.msu.edu
<https://www.canr.msu.edu/vanburen>



4-H AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

A total of 295 youth and 128 adult volunteers were enrolled in the Van Buren County 4-H Youth Development program in 2020- 2021. Our volunteers dedicated their time mentoring, teaching and providing leadership to the youth of our 12 county clubs. The 4-H Leaders' Association, made up of leaders from each of the clubs, continued to be active in fundraising, facilitating community service projects and advising our 4-H Program and Youth Development Educator Janice Zerbe.

Our volunteers are the foundation of 4-H, therefore, much of Janice's time is spent recruiting, training and coaching volunteers in order to maintain a high-quality program that is safe and welcoming to all youth. In effort to equip our volunteer leaders with tools to manage conflict, each leader was required to participate in a short online training in order to stay in good standing this year.

In 2021, Janice continued to expand her reach into county classrooms to provide social emotional educational programming via the Mindful Me and Mindful Mechanics curricula. She reached over 173 youth and completed 25 programs in Mattawan Elementary and Decatur Middle schools. Through a variety of hands-on activities, and story telling, young people learn to practice mindful habits that lead to improvements in developing a sense of self, time management, stress management, and emotional regulation. Said one teacher about the program:

"I just wanted to take a minute to thank Janice for coming to the ECEC to do her mindfulness program. It was so well done and very age appropriate. The children are still referring to some of the concepts they learned. Janice did a beautiful job with the children. She takes charge and can 'read the room'. I am looking forward to having her back next year. I would strongly recommend the program for the Kindergarten children at the EES. The materials for the projects were awesome and fun for the children."

Janice sought MSU Extension colleagues to assist her with programs and bring their expertise to our youth and volunteers in the county. In partnership with Telemon Corporation she and others taught financial literacy skills to young people at their annual Show Me the Money Event. And for the second year in a row championed the Entrepreneurship Summer Camp in partnership with Southwestern Michigan College.

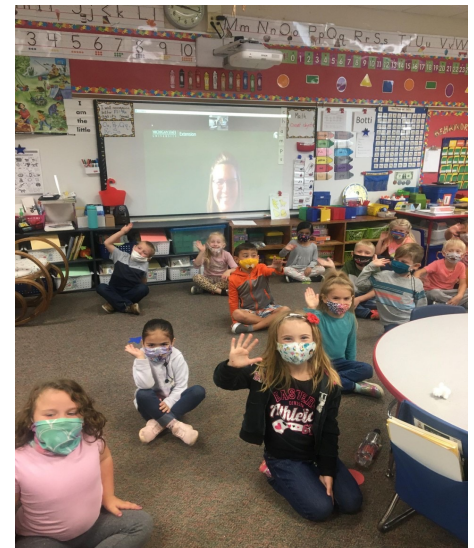
Science Literacy was another major thrust of youth development work in 2021. Yearlong work with 4-H youth, in classroom settings and summer programs, 425 youth participate in 20 science literacy programs in 2021. Two highlights include:

1) In the third year of the La Cosecha grant, MSU Extension worked with the Van Buren ISD summer migrant school to teach young people about science, agriculture and careers by teaching through the history of chocolate. This program is a tasty and interesting way to keep youth involved in learning about science and careers. The program was replicated with other groups over the summer and overall, more than 130 young people were involved.

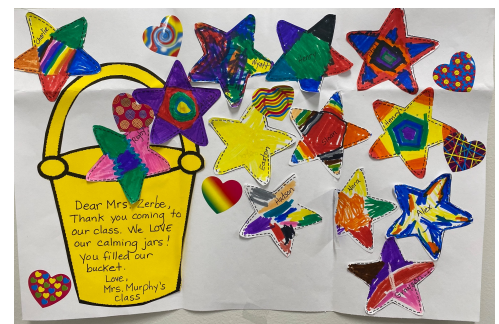
2) An important program related to zoonotic diseases is The One Health – Health for One curriculum which is designed to teach that environmental health, animal health and human health are all connected. Students learn habits to minimize zoonotic disease transmission, reduce health risks and apply the principles of One Health to 4-H animal projects. Most lessons were taught online and featured engaging components to help reinforce important science-based concepts.



Learning the ropes! Van Buren Voyagers 4-H club on the tall ship in South Haven



Janice Zerbe shown above teaching via zoom in Hartford in 2020. Remote teaching was effective but getting back to the classroom in 2021 was way more fun as shown from the thank you stars below!





AGRICULTURE

MI AG IDEAS TO GROW WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

MSU Extension Agriculture Educators rose to the challenge in 2021 in being able to continue to pivot their traditional educational efforts to methods that would provide clientele with access to programs and information from their homes or office. One significant effort developed to meet this need was the MI Ag Ideas to Grow With virtual conference.

This unique event combined the annual events of Ag Action Day, Branch County Farmers Day, and Southwest Michigan Horticulture Days into a week-long virtual program. It featured subject matter tracks from livestock production, fruit and vegetable production, sustainability, soil health and irrigation to horticulture and home gardening. A track was also offered for youth participants. All in all, 55 different education sessions were offered.

Each day focused on specific topics with sessions occurring at the top of every hour. The horticulture, home gardening and animal agriculture sessions were featured daily throughout the week. Educators worked with state officials to make it possible for attendees to receive RUP and CCA credits for eligible sessions.

While this program was developed to provide access to education typically delivered at MSU Extension's in-person programming the success of the virtual platform exceeded the expectations of the planning team. During the weeklong event participants from 47 counties in Michigan (including Van Buren) attended sessions and over 980 sessions were accessed by clientele. Attendees included some who not participated in the traditional in-person programs in the past.

"Thank you so much for putting on this conference. I've attended the past few years and I always learn a lot. You guys do a really good job of providing various quality materials and knowledgeable speakers."

FIELD CROPS WEBINAR SERIES

With 754 registrants, it was a record year for the 2021 Field Crops Webinar series. Sixty-two percent of attendees were full time farmers and 25% were part time farmers. A whopping 880 completed surveys were submitted. Eighty-seven percent of attendees reported they learned something and 372 (42%) said they would make a change on their farm to manage risk and improve production efficiency on 295,366 acres. This totaled a financial impact of \$3,223,318 or an average of \$11/acre towards the change on their farm. What an amazing impact MSU Extension's 5-part webinar series had on Michigan's Field crop industry!

MICHIANA IRRIGATED CORN AND SOYBEAN CONFERENCE

Producing corn and soybeans under irrigation provides both opportunities and challenges for producers and a high concentration of the irrigated production occurs in Southwest Michigan and Northeast Indiana. Because of these two factors, MSUE and Purdue Extension have collaborated with the corn and soybean checkoff organizations in Michigan and Indiana to conduct a high-profile, multi-state educational program in Shipshewana, IN since 2014. Due to COVID-19, the conference was held virtually in 2021.

One hundred fifty-three producers and agronomists participated in the virtual conference. A post season follow-up evaluation revealed that:

- 96% of the respondents gained new knowledge by participating in the program.
- 88% said that they utilized the information they learned on their farms during the 2021 growing season.
- Twenty producers said they earned additional money by implementing the new information they learned at the program.

The average amount of additional income was \$18.60 per acre applied to 8,786 acres, producing an actual financial impact of \$163,375 in 2021 alone. The participants also provided specific changes they made and listed soybean topics they wanted to learn more about.

Producers raising corn and soybeans under irrigation in Southwest Michigan and Northwest Indiana have come to rely on this annual event as an important source of information for helping them mitigate the challenges and maximizing the opportunities associated with irrigated crop production. This is demonstrated by the consistently strong attendance the willingness of participants to provide meaningful input regarding topics for future meetings.

SMALL FRUIT GROWER EDUCATION

MSU Extension Fruit Team Educators continued to provide intense support to the county's blueberry and small fruit growers throughout 2021. Programs such as pre-bloom meetings, weekly integrated pest management twilight sessions both face-to-face and remote, implementation of an initiative to improve blueberry pollination and one-on-one grower consultation throughout the growing season.



CONSUMER HORTICULTURE

Consumer Horticulture Educator Christopher Imler and Wripton Graham, Extension Master Gardener Program Coordinator joined the district in 2020. Since then, Van Buren County has seen additional programming efforts related to gardening and Extension Master Gardener volunteer education. The local offices in the district have also received increased support in answering homeowner gardening questions and outreach.

Chris has an additional veteran’s liaison focus, thus MSU Extension has become a greater partner in providing services and outreach to our local veterans. We are all looking forward to the launch of the Horticulture Therapy Program in partnership with the Van Buren County Veterans Office in 2022.

Some highlights of consumer horticulture in 2021 include:

- Intro to Bulbs education for Van Buren Vo-Tech students
- Sessions at the Van Buren Conservation District’s Backyard Symposium
- Monthly Horticulture Cafe’ workshops for Master Gardeners
- Horticulture education at the Veteran’s Standdown in Decatur
- Informational session on Lymantria Dispar in Pine Grove Township.
- 12 Extension Master Gardeners reside in Van Buren County



The property at 801 Hazen St. approved by Van Buren County Board of Commissioners to be used for the Veterans Horticulture Therapy Program. The 3-year pilot program will directly support the county’s, and state’s goal of improving outreach, education, and vocational services for military veterans.

WHAT IS “ASK EXTENSION”?

The infographic on the cover page of this report reads that Van Buren had 80 “Ask Extension” inquiries answered. The explanation for the factoid is this:

MSU Extension’s [“Ask Extension”](#) is an online tool that can be used by community members to get answers from MSU Extension experts. Questions received have ranged from food safety, agriculture and gardening, to natural resources questions relating to frogs and snakes to land use and home ownership questions.

Once questions are submitted, they are “wrangled” by a team at MSU Extension and forwarded to the MSU expert who can answer the question. Questions come in from all around Michigan as well as from all over the county. With our national extension service network, some questions are even answered by colleagues from other universities when needed.

Seeing what questions are submitted can also help MSU Extension educators see trends and identify needs for other educational products like articles or even research projects.

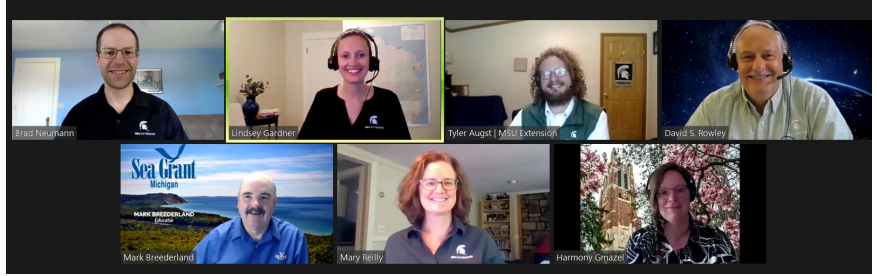
In 2020, MSU Extension staff have answered 8,500 questions - 163 MSU Extension experts and 26 Extension Master Gardeners participated. The number of questions answered did decline this year compared to 2020, but this is not a surprise due to the increased usage of all online tools last year. However, the trend is still going up as we look over the last few years. Since 2017, when the Ask Extension web presence was enhanced on the MSU Extension website, there has been a significant increase in the number of questions each year. Another contributing factor is the comprehensive effort by MSU Extension staff to promote this online tool through large events such as Home and Garden Shows, articles, email signatures, presentations, program related websites, and more. Some highlights for 2021 include:

- 7,470 questions answered.
- 163 MSU Extension staff and 26 MSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers answered questions.
- 10 of the top 20 responders were MSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers.



GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITY VITALITY

The MSU Extension Government and Community Vitality Team delivers high quality educational programs to community leaders and residents of Van Buren County. They provide certification programs, group facilitation and one on one consulting and problem solving with community leaders and decision makers facing challenging issues.



CITIZEN PLANNER

The MSU Extension Citizen Planner (CP) program provides lay planners a unique program to learn the fundamentals of planning and zoning. Thousands of Michigan residents have graduated from the program since 1999.

In 2021, 91 people participated in the CP program via Zoom and 206 completed the self-paced Citizen Planner Online (CPO) program. Seven graduates were from Van Buren County. CP is a 6-week program with 18 hours of instruction. CPO is structured like a Netflix Series with two seasons, with 12 episodes per season.

Comments from 2021 evaluations included:

- "This course was MAGNIFICENT!"*
- "Great class - recommend for any public official."*
- "This class will really help as we work through our solar ordinance and upcoming master plan update."*

In 2021, nine individuals went on to become a Master Citizen Planner (MCP). A credential recognized around the state as a sign of excellence. One MCP graduate was Leslie Elrod from Columbia Township in Van Buren County.

Leslie completed the CP program in 2020 via Zoom and continued to show a dedication toward land use education by applying to be a Master Citizen Planner. As part of the MCP process Leslie proved planning and zoning knowledge by passing an exam and in creating and delivering the MCP Capstone Project with a presentation to the Columbia Township Planning Commission in December.

The presentation focused on the legal context for planning and zoning in Michigan, the role of the planning commission in balancing property rights with the public good, and an overview of emerging planning and zoning topics that either already are or have the potential to impact the township.

After the successful presentation, the planning commission continued their work of reviewing potential zoning text amendments. During discussion Leslie's presentation was referenced several times by the township staff as they completed their work. Our newest MCP was thrilled to see the work being used to help the township solve real life issues.

OTHER 2021 TEAM HIGHLIGHTS

MSUE Educator Tyler Augst facilitated a strategic planning workshop for the **Friends of Van Buren District Library** that resulted in a set of set of goals to guide the group's work in 2022. The group participated in a variety of goal setting and visioning activities as well as education on effective meetings and parliamentary procedure.

Comments on the work included:

"Luanne [Friends of Van Buren District Library President] forwarded the report to me and I had been meaning to check in with you to see how it went! I've had at least one person in raving about how great it was, how you kept people on track, etc. and I am SO happy to hear it! The report looks great and I'm excited to see where things go from here!" - Elissa Zimmer, Van Buren District Library Program Coordinator

MSU Extension partnered with the Michigan Association of Regions to host 14 workshops around the state for local and tribal government officials to discuss **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund** spending opportunities. Participants were able to attend the sessions in person or choose to join remotely. One of these hybrid workshops was held at the Van Buren Conference Center in Lawrence. The sessions covered ARPA fund basic rules, best practices and early examples of ARPA spending; practical considerations for contracts, accounting, and project management. Group discussion centered on regional collaboration, leveraging funding sources and setting priorities. [Notes from the session can be found here.](#)

This workshop series had over 750 participants from Michigan's units of government including several from Van Buren County. When asked about the workshop one participant said:

"Great job! I am thinking more broadly about ways to use our ARPA funds. I was very pleased with the attendance, facilitation, the information shared and received as well as the flow of the workshop. Thank you! I can think of many ways to use this extra revenue. After this webinar, I feel like we have so many more options than I originally thought."



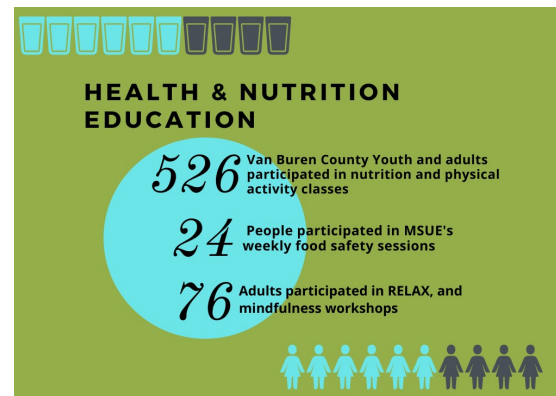
HEALTH AND NUTRITION

FOOD SAFETY

In 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic progressed forcing people to stay home, interest in gardening and preserving food at home skyrocketed. This was seen by the enormous interest in our online **Food Preservation** classes as well as in retail settings where garden seeds, canning jars, lids, and canners became precious commodities and very hard to access. After moving quickly to pivot MSU Extension Food Preservation classes to an online format there was an explosion of interest as evidenced by more than 10,000 people registering for online classes from June-December 2020.

Continuing into 2021, we recognize that online learning offers opportunities to reach more people with education on safe home food preservation practices. Distance learning can address the discrepancies caused by socioeconomic and geographic differences, schedules, and ease of accessibility. The team reached 8,811 people in over 100 programs including 24 in Van Buren County.

Preserving MI Harvest Food Preservation classes were offered from mid-January through early December 2021. Classes continue to be offered mostly as a virtual format and are presented at both 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. on Thursdays. Each Preserving MI Harvest program includes a lesson, and a panel to answer consumer questions. In 2021, a variety of food preservation topics were covered in order to provide research-based education and resources to consumers on safely preserving food at home and the program reached 2,526 consumers.



HEALTH TEAM

The MSU Extension Health team offers a variety of programs to help people learn to improve their lives through educational programs in social emotional issues, chronic disease, addiction and pain management. Two examples of programs that had participation from Van Buren residents in 2021 are:

Mindfulness for Better Living includes a suite of one-time workshops to help people learn ways to use mindfulness to manage everyday stress. Workshops across a variety of topics were offered throughout 2021. Mindfulness can be defined as paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. Research has shown that practicing mindfulness is effective in reducing stress-related symptoms such as worry, depression and physical tension, and may be helpful in managing chronic conditions.

Alternatives to Anger is a four-part educational series designed to help adults, parents and caregivers increase their knowledge about anger issues and put anger management and healthy relationship skills into practice. Through presentations, group discussion and skill-building activities, participants learn what anger is, what triggers anger, calming down and de-stressing methods, the principles of problem solving, effective communication skills and forgiving and letting go of the past.

NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

With a focus on those eligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP), MSU Extension works with partners to bring 6 to 8 hours of nutrition and physical activity education to students, adults and seniors. The SNAP Education curriculum is an evidence-based program that helps people lead healthier lives, teaches people about good nutrition and how to make their food dollars stretch further. In 2021, MSU Extension community nutrition instructors reached 526 youth and adults in Van Buren County.