

KENT COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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Message from the District Director

The Kent County MSU Extension Annual Report brings the MSU Extension mission to life for county commissioners and residents. The data and stories within show how education is impacting lives in Kent County through an educational process that provides knowledge and resources to all. As you will see in this report, Kent County and MSU Extension form an integrated partnership serving the needs of students, farmers, senior citizens, veterans, and anyone else seeking to better their lives through learning. Thank you for another great year of partnership and community impact! We appreciate your support in helping MSU Extension serve the residents of Kent County.
Sincerely, Kai Gritter

Impact



31 community coalitions within the county that MSU Extension employees are members of



415 answered Ask Extension questions



7,526 participants from the county attending programs



324 total volunteers serving the county



906 programs (across the state) attended by participants from this county

Overall Impact



112 community partnerships



1,877 client consultations



156 programs hosted in the county



75,875 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts



67,320 participants in community, food, and environment programs from across Michigan



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

Financial Literacy

In 2024, more than **220** 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 are; Homebuyer Education, Surviving & Thriving a Fixed Income, Savvy Tips for Small Business, Informed Renter, Retirement Myths & Facts, Top 10 Credit Tips, Every Penny Counts, Protecting Your Identity, How Much Home Can You Afford, Make a Spending Plan Work For You, and Adulting 101 (which covers various topics).



Economic Development, Environmental Conservation, and Agricultural Productivity



328 participants in county agriculture programs



504 soil test samples processed



89 Residents who participated in Beekeeping or Pollinator programs



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

Smart Gardening Outreach

In 2024, MSU Extension's Consumer Horticulture team engaged over 3,227 people through outreach at events like the Home & Garden Show, Windmill Island Garden Events, workshops and webinars. 1,497 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 45-minute seminars for thousands of attendees.

Additionally, the annual Shindig for the GIG fundraiser combined education and philanthropy, offering guests access to MSU Extension's newest educational displays in a vibrant community setting.



116 Kent County residents who participated in the 2024 Dig In! Series



199 participants in the 2024 Grand Ideas Garden (GIG) Bare Root Plant event



Foundations of Gardening

In 2024, our MSU Extension Consumer Horticulture Team had 728 participants total (57 from Kent County) in two (Fall and Winter) ten-week sessions of the MSU Extension Foundations of Gardening Course. This course was open to both the public and those wanting to later apply to 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 2024

Now in the fourth season, the Plant Quest webinar series drew a record 830+ participants from 17 states, marking a 30% increase in enrollment. Hosted by MSU Extension's Rebecca Finneran, with support from Diane Brady and Caitlin Splawski, the series featured engaging, plant-focused topics including pollinator-friendly species, well-behaved natives, and standout perennials. To enhance accessibility, sessions were recorded and scholarships were awarded to 28 participants. Evaluations showed strong knowledge gains; 99% learned about pollinator-supporting plants, and 76% gained insights on invasive species. Economically, 99% of respondents said they would purchase plants based on what they learned.



Overall, Plant Quest was a successful program that reached participants across the nation. The virtual format allowed this broad reach and a diverse topic line up catered to a diverse audience of plant lovers.

GLEXP0 2024

At the 2024 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, and Farm Market Expo & Michigan Greenhouse Growers Expo (GLEXP0), held December 9–12, MSU Extension educators and specialists organized 65 of the 93 educational sessions, drawing 3,162 attendees (219 from Kent County) and hosting 382 exhibitors. The event offered substantial continuing education opportunities, including 47 Michigan RUP credits and 112 CCA credits.

A highlight was the Farm Market Bus Tour, coordinated by Garrett Zeigler, Mariel Borgman, Derek Plotkowski and Ben Phillips. The tour included 156 participants across three buses visiting five farm markets and agritourism sites. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees appreciating the diversity of stops and networking opportunities, though some wished more markets had been open during the visit.

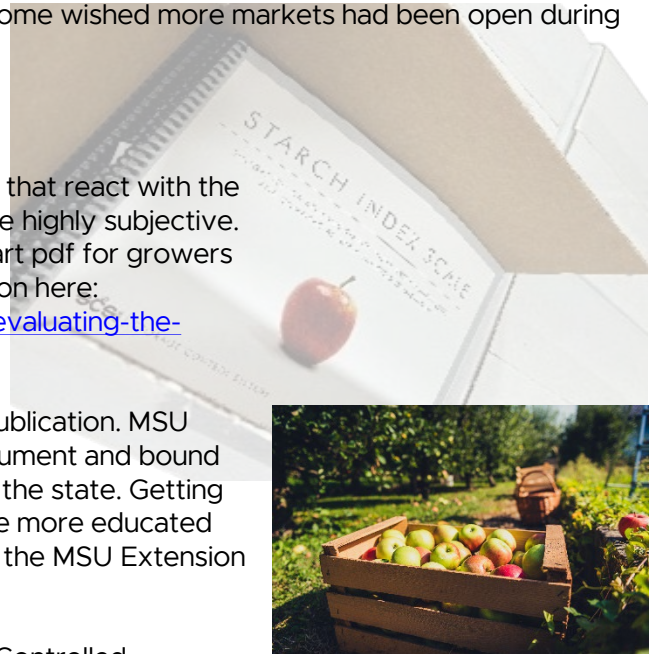
Apple Education

Apple growers evaluate apple maturity with iodine sprays that react with the starch content in apples. While this is widely used, it can be highly subjective. Anna Wallis and Randy Beaudry put together a starch chart pdf for growers to use as a resource in their starch testing. More information here:

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/new-starch-charts-for-evaluating-the-maturity-of-apple-varieties-in-michigan>.

This article has been viewed more than 250 times since publication. MSU Extension's Lindsay Brown printed 500 copies of the document and bound on weather-resistant paper for grower distribution across the state. Getting this resource in the hands of growers allows them to make more educated harvest management decisions. Lindsay also worked with the MSU Extension Fruit Team to distribute copies across Michigan.

In July, Lindsay Brown and Dr. Randy Beaudry planned a Controlled Atmospheric Storage Clinic. Dr. Beaudry assembled the top North American experts on apple storage for a day of lectures and discussion on their recent work. This meeting attracted participants from across the country.



Bacterial Canker Research

In early May, Erin Lauwers and Brown collaborated with Dr. George Sundin on a research project focused on managing bacterial canker in sweet cherries. Just two weeks later, Lindsay visited a farm experiencing a severe outbreak of the disease. Thanks to the recent research, she was able to offer the grower timely, research-backed recommendations tailored to their situation. They expressed deep appreciation for the specific, up-to-date guidance as they began planning their next steps for disease management. The 2024 spring weather was especially favorable for bacterial canker, Lindsay continued to share our findings with multiple growers, helping them understand current control options and make informed decisions.

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 youth in the Ottawa County 4-H program.



39 county 4-H clubs



229 enrolled youth in 4-H



1,393 total youth participants



121 total 4-H volunteers



Teen Mental Health First Aid - Wyoming

In 2024, Amber Clingman taught Teen Mental Health First Aid to 240 students at Wyoming High School. Amber stated that the kids were fantastic, and she began to build personal relationships with them. Amber was there three days a week for most of the school day. While providing in class instruction, one of the in-class teachers reached out to discuss therapist options for herself. Amber and the teacher met between classes, talked about her needs, and options for a mental health therapist in the community. Amber stated, **“It’s encouraging to know she trusts me to share her personal needs, and to provide resources.”** At the end of the course, one student approached Amber and stated: **“You are easy to talk to, and it’s nice to have someone who is closer to us in age, and looks like us.”** These classes have made an impact on students and teachers.

2024 State Horse Show

In August of 2024, ten Kent County 4-H’ers participated in the State 4-H Show. The three-day event includes more than 275 classes of 4-H members and their projects competing on a statewide basis at the Michigan State University Pavillion for Agriculture and Livestock Education in Lansing.



Planting Micro-Orchard

Kent County 4-H Program Coordinator, Tyler Lidgard and Grand Rapids Christian School youth planted a micro-orchard on their campus. The youth were able to plant nine new fruit trees on the elementary school property. The fruit trees were donated by Friends of Grand Rapids Parks, who also helped by supplying shovels, mulch and woodchips. The elementary youth learned how deep to plant the trees, how much water they will need, and learned about different fruit trees and what it takes to keep them thriving.

Friends of 4-H Event

Kent County 4-H hosted a successful Friends of 4-H and Community Partners event on October 9, 2024, at the Kent County MSU Extension office. Local organizations, volunteers, and partners came together to network, learn about 4-H, and explore collaboration opportunities. Attendees heard from dedicated volunteers who shared insights on their roles and the program's impact on youth.

Participants also enjoyed snacks and received exclusive 4-H swag. A word cloud activity gathered pre- and post-event data, showing a shift in perception and a deeper understanding of 4-H. The event strengthened community connections and sparked conversations about future partnerships, leaving us excited for the impact of this growing network.



Brookside Brooders and Eggs

On January 31, 2024, we delivered three incubators to Brookside Elementary and Union High School for use in 2nd grade and special education classes. These schools offered a chance to test our embryology curriculum in very different settings. Ms. Warmuskerken's 2nd grade class, already home to a few pets, was thrilled by the new chicks. Though only three hatched due to infertile eggs, students named them Valentino, May, and Mario. May quickly stood out for her size and early attempts to fly, amusing the kids with her "hops."

Each chick's personality was captured in posters created by the students. Union High School plans to repeat the experiment with biology teacher Ms. Durso and special ed teacher Mr. Keogan. The project gave students a rare, exciting chance to observe chicks hatching over 31 days, and left them eager to hatch even more.

Sewing Camps

Youth involved in 4-H sewing not only developed valuable technical skills but also strengthened their interpersonal abilities. Among the participants were two youth with special needs who successfully completed the program independently, working patiently and at their own pace. Volunteers expressed pride and excitement in their achievements. Meanwhile, two other participants quickly became friends, exchanging phone numbers after the first class. They worked quietly and intently, creating headbands and designing patterns. All of the participants, ranging from 4th to 8th grade, were kind, well-behaved, and collaborated well across age groups.




4-H Shooting Sports


Tyler Lidgard, Kent County 4-H Program Coordinator, traveled to the Saginaw Field and Streams Club to support youth participating in the Michigan 4-H Shooting Sports Tournament. Before the competition, she met with the Kent County team to answer questions, offer guidance, and encourage them as they prepared to showcase their skills. The youth competed in the air rifle category and earned first place in precision for their age group; an impressive recognition of their dedication and hard work. Through the tournament, participants gained valuable lessons in patience, composure under pressure, and leadership, while also deepening their understanding of the responsibility involved in handling firearms safely in public settings.

Public Health and Nutrition Programming

 **1,731** nutrition and physical activity participants hosted in-county

 **2,301** residents who participated in health and nutrition programs

 **16** nutrition and physical activity sites receiving Policy, Systems and Environmental education within the county

 **27** policy, systems, and environmental changes with those PSE sites impacting **3,928** people.

Food Safety

In 2024, 221 Kent County residents took classes and accessed resources from MSU Extension’s Food Safety Team. These classes covered a variety of topics that helped residents gain the knowledge and training to prevent food borne illnesses. Some examples of the classes attended are:

- ServSafe®
- Preserving MI Harvest – Various Topics
- Michigan Cottage Food Law
- Pantry Food Safety – It’s Your Job
- Food Safety for Food Service Workers
- Cooking for Crowds
- Moving Beyond Cottage Food Law
- Safe Food = Healthy Kids



Seeing Nutrition Possibilities

When the Team Nutrition 23 grant began recruiting, Orchard View School District showed early interest despite having no prior connection with MSU Extension. Their food service director (FSD), who served two districts, was experienced with grants but lacked time and knowledge to start a wellness committee. After connecting with our community nutrition instructors, our team met the FSD in May 2024.

Over the summer, we provided resources to prepare for a fall launch. By fall, it was clear the FSD needed more support to build a team. MSU Extension helped by sharing outreach tools like posters and templates. We maintained contact through regular emails and meetings. In December, Orchard View held its first wellness committee meeting, forming a motivated group. The FSD planned another meeting for January 2025. With the right tools and structure, our partners are set up for success.

Fitkids Program Results

MSU Extension’s Yesenia Velasco provided a 6-week program at Fitkids for a group of adults with children using the Cooking for One curricula. One participant shared she had high blood pressure and was at risk for Type 2 diabetes. After learning to cook with the Seven Herb and Spice Blend and trying to drink more water, she began using the blend in all her meals and reduced her salt intake. At her next doctor’s visit, her blood pressure and sugar levels had improved significantly. Her doctor was so surprised by the change that he rechecked her readings and said that if she maintains these levels, future checkups could be reduced to once a year. She’s committed to continuing her healthier habits.



Health & Mindfulness

In a continued effort to manage our physical and mental health, in 2024, MSU Extension’s Health team educators reached 881 Kent County residents (81% increase in participation from 2023) by offering numerous session opportunities. These sessions explored mindfulness basics such as breathing, moving, eating, walking, thought surfing, taming your busy mind and more. Research has shown that people who are more mindful are generally happier and report less anxiety, symptoms of depression, anger and worries. Some of the session topics were:

- RELAX, Alternatives to Anger
- Sleep Education
- Brief Practices in Mindfulness
- Sleep Basics
- Building Resilience to Avoid Burnout
- Changing Negative Self-Talk
- Mindful Walking
- Begin with a Breath
- Be Kind to Your Mind
- Mindfully Eating
- Stronger Memory
- Stress Less with Mindfulness
- Tai Chi for Arthritis & Falls Prevention
- Mental Health First Aid
- Mindful Laughter
- Matter of Balance
- Mindfulness for Children
- Diabetes Simplified
- Chronic Pain PATH
- Smart Food Choices
- Walk With Ease
- Dining With Diabetes
- Teaching Kids Mindful Eating
- Caring for the Caregiver
- Keep Moving to Prevent Health Problems
- Keys to Embrace Aging
- Calming Down & Destressing
- Mindfully Feeding Infants & Toddlers



Serving Retired Vets

MSU Extension’s Kai Gritter met the Michigan Veteran Homes (MVH) Community Engagement Coordinator during a regional Veterans Coalition meeting at which she presented. The MVH Community Engagement Coordinator was interested in bringing MSU Extension’s Health programs to MVH in Grand Rapids. Together they planned for a six-week series that promoted healthy aging and wellness. Veteran community members were engaged during sessions and were very appreciative of the programming.

Child & Family Development

In 2024, 256 Kent County residents attended a variety of Child and Family Development classes. MSU Extension provides a wide range of free online classes for parents and caregivers of children of all ages and early childhood professionals. Some of the webinars Kent County residents attended are:

- Positive Discipline
- What Children Need to Know to Start School
- Understanding a Toddler’s World
- Together We Can
- Guiding Principles for Highly Successful parenting
- Purpose of Play
- How Children Develop
- Reducing Challenging Behaviors
- Parenting in the Digital Age
- Mindfully Feeding Infants & Toddlers
- ABC’s of ACES
- Learning to Talk
- Supporting Children Through Grief
- Screen Time for Children
- Helping Children Manage Stress
- Infant Safety
- The Parent Talk System
- Mathematics for Infants & Toddlers



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 our [website](#).



Making It In Michigan

The 15th annual *Making It In Michigan Conference and Trade Show* took place on April 24, 2024, at the Lansing Center, featuring 148 Michigan-based food vendors, many affiliated with the MSU Product Center. A vendor survey (54 respondents) revealed:

- 87% met at least one store representative, distributor, or broker
- 38% met five or more
- 83% had at least one express interest in buying their product
- 33 unique buyers attended

Award Highlights:

The Next SKU Could Be You Award: Downriver Chip Co. (Rockwood) & Urge Juice (Berkley)
The Golden Ticket Award: Force One Foods/Jedi Chili (Grand Rapids)
First Time at Fresh Thyme Award: Wani Cakes (Detroit)
Green and White Award: Zolli Candy (Commerce Charter Township)

After 'thank yous' were extended to all entrepreneurs and retail partners, the Product Center team began planning the 2025 event.

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