



COVID-19 RESPONSE



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Food Systems

The UW-Madison Division of Extension has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on our state's food system by developing supply chain innovations, trainings, and other resources to maintain and enhance food systems. By ensuring that food producers have access to the skills and markets necessary for success and that all households have ample access to affordable, nutritious food, the vibrant Wisconsin food system will recover from this disruption.

Pandemic-related disruptions caused challenges for producers, consumers, and nonprofit assistance programs

The COVID-19 crisis has amplified preexisting vulnerabilities in the food system – impacting food production, food supply chains, market access, and emergency food systems in catastrophic ways. Food producers, processors, retailers, and restaurants had to quickly retool their operations to incorporate COVID-19 regulations and safety practices. These changes frequently increased the cost of production while reducing capacity. Many farmers lost key markets, including restaurants, institutional food service providers, and household consumers. This resulted in a loss of sales, wasted product, and the need to quickly identify alternative customers and marketing channels.

Residents across Wisconsin faced greater food security challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak due to job losses, underemployment, disrupted food and nutrition programs, and a stressed emergency food system. In mid-2020, adult hunger in the U.S. had more than doubled, with over one-third of households reporting that they were unable to afford sufficient food at some point in the last month. Forecasts for the remainder of the year are also concerning: Wisconsin ranks among the states with the highest projected increases in food insecurity as a result of the pandemic.

These challenges underscore a need

to support retail and emergency food supply chains, households, farmers, and agri-food businesses as they navigate the shifting regulatory environment, look for alternative distribution and access models, and address household as well as community food insecurity.

How Extension responded

Extension faculty and staff responded through various means to create new markets for farmers, meet increased need for gardening and producing support, and synthesize new requirements for mitigating COVID-19 risk.

Examples of this include:

Developing feed/forage conversion tool to help farmers prove eligibility for coronavirus food assistance program

State and federal governments created various relief funds to assist businesses that experienced supply chain disruptions, lost customers, and faced reduced or suspended operations due to the pandemic and related safety policies. However, applying for these emergency funds often requires navigating extensive bureaucracy and providing detailed information that business owners may not have immediate access to. For example, to successfully apply to the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, farmers must provide information about feed/forage conversions that many producers do not have readily available, especially when their farms are in crisis due to the



pandemic. Inability to provide these data creates a major barrier to receiving financial assistance.

In response, educators and specialists from Extension's Farm Management program developed online feed and forage conversion tools for farmers that calculate the grain equivalents for eligible crops, generating information necessary to apply for relief funds. The online toolkit enables more qualifying Wisconsin farmers to apply for and receive aid. Farmers/ranchers/producers made up 60% of toolkit users to date, with a third of all users reporting the resource saved them time in applying for aid. More than 480,000 bushels were computed using the tool so far, which could be valued at approximately \$65,000 in potential USDA direct payments.

Creating new markets in face of supply chain bottlenecks

Virus-related shutdowns and worker shortages at a number of swine harvest and processing facilities left many Wisconsin-raised hogs without a market, even as grocery stores saw a rise in pork purchases. In response, Extension partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection and the Wisconsin Pork Association to form Passion for Pork. The dual mission of the initiative is to assist farmers in finding alternate markets for their hogs and to increase the availability of Wisconsin-raised pork products for local consumption.

By facilitating conversations among regional entities about factors such as pricing and logistics, this rapid-response initiative has helped stem a hog surplus while fostering valuable new connections in both retail and emergency food supply chains. Passion for Pork has partnered with pork producers and Wisconsin-based meat purveyor Neesvig Meat to help align production and processing capacity and identify markets for Wisconsin hogs.



The initiative forged valuable relationships with the state's emergency food network, resulting in the distribution of thousands of pounds of pork to Wisconsin residents through food banks while creating an additional market for pork producers in this economically challenging time.

Equipping first-time vegetable gardeners with tips for successful seed starting

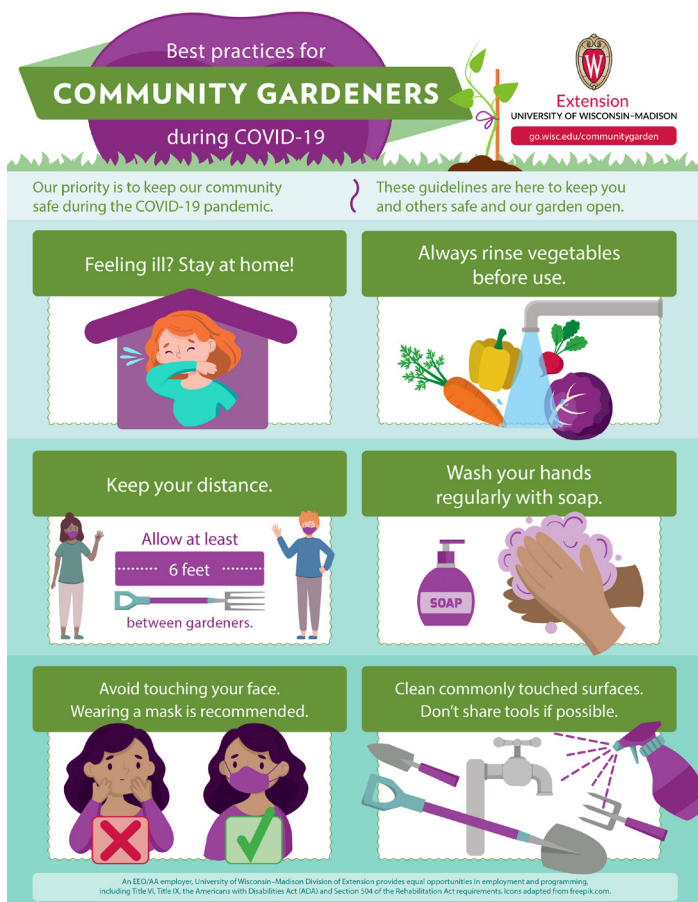
The pandemic and its economic impact hit households and communities just as farmers and gardeners across Wisconsin were gearing up for the growing season. Facing a "safer-at-home" order, job losses, unstable food supply chains, and greater food insecurity, new and experienced gardeners alike sought guidance on home and community vegetable gardening.

Extension Horticulture staff across the state met the demand by developing research-based online trainings on topics such as starting vegetables by seed. The seed-starting training demonstrated techniques to successfully start and raise healthy vegetable seedlings, aimed members of the public and Master Gardener volunteers. The first session was so popular that it was repeated. The two sessions attracted more than 400 attendees and an additional 140 views of the archived event.

"I have not started seeds myself before. I will be giving it a try this year. I appreciate the expertise."

— Program participant

Program participants reported learning techniques that would enable them to address production issues such as lighting, time of seeding and planting, and fertilizer application. Participants also reported plans to change their gardening practices based on information acquired from the training.



Socializing COVID-19 safety guidelines for diverse community gardeners

Community gardens play an important role in providing access to fresh and nutritious food, reduced stress, and improved neighborhoods. As with home gardening, there was a resurgence of interest in community gardens at the outset of the pandemic. However, concerns about social distancing and contact-based virus transmission threatened the 2020 season. In the early days of the pandemic, inconsistency between state and local guidelines on safe practices added to the confusion and resulted in a patchwork approach. Finally, language barriers posed a challenge for gardens serving immigrant populations with limited English fluency, raising questions about how to effectively distill and disseminate best practices to ensure the safety of gardeners while respecting primary languages.

In response to emergency orders and the inclusion of community gardens as “essential,” Extension Master Gardener and Community Food Systems program managers, specialists, and educators partnered with Extension food safety specialists and the Wisconsin

Departments of Health Services and Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to review and refine guidelines for community garden coordinators on best practices, which were later translated into multilingual resources and posted on social media.

This COVID-responsive collaboration between regulatory agencies and Extension demonstrated timely coordination of guideline development, dissemination, and linguistically relevant messaging on participating organization platforms, including resources translated into five languages.

Local responses coordinate new networks and innovative responses to food insecurity

The COVID-19 pandemic created urgent food security challenges for households and communities across Wisconsin and the nation. Since the virus-induced economic crisis began, more than 90,000 additional people have enrolled in FoodShare, Wisconsin’s largest nutrition program alone. Yet meeting the growing need is not just a question of supply – spatial distancing requirements and other COVID-safety precautions have upended many emergency food providers’ standard operations and distribution channels. At the same time, they are experiencing significant volunteer shortages due to their historic reliance on seniors, a population that is particularly vulnerable to complications from COVID-19.

How Extension responded

Extension staff and faculty across Wisconsin bolstered local responses by coordinating efforts, creating efficiencies, and crafting new strategies.

Examples of this include:

School nutrition efforts continue in the face of major disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic required school meal programs to quickly shift to new models of distribution to ensure that youth continued to have access to healthy food while outside of the school setting. New distribution models needed to address both safety and food access issues. In southwestern Wisconsin, FoodWise staff in Crawford, Richland, and Vernon counties created connections and provided resources

for school food service directors to coordinate response, enhance nutritional offerings, and share best practices. This collaboration resulted in stronger relationships among school food service directors, provided an opportunity to encourage schools to offer healthier food options, and expanded the reach of Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program promotion through school-based marketing. Evaluations showed 80 percent of participants indicated the coalition's work improved meal delivery and nutritional quality. The group plans to continue meeting beyond the pandemic to explore additional opportunities for collaboration.

Emergency food distribution across a network of meal programs serving pantries and schools

Extension educators from Kenosha and Racine counties representing the Health & Well-Being and Community Development institutes convened a group of cross-sector partners to coordinate and address shared challenges. This work resulted in an online, continually updated, multilingual resource with community food access information.

The project also prompted increased coordination across emergency food service providers, increased awareness via media coverage on the importance of supporting farmers, a collaborative grant submission, and increased food donations to local emergency food pantries.

Leveraging local food producers to alleviate food bank supply disruptions

As the Dane County area began to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, it saw rising rates of food insecurity and food system supply chain failures. As farmers markets, restaurants, schools, and event spaces closed, Dane County farms lost access to markets. Food



donations that would typically go to food banks also decreased as grocery stores struggled to keep their shelves stocked and food drives were temporarily put on hold. Extension educators leveraged their work in the local food supply chain to bring together Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin, the food bank's federal CARES Act grant funding, and local growers. This new supply chain connection engaged 24 farms in the project, with 500 boxes of product a day delivered to pantries across Dane County. In August alone, more than \$872,000 was channeled into the local farm economy.

Increasing food-access, supporting local dairy, and creating new partnerships in a tribal community

The Menominee Early Childcare Services Department (Daycare and Head Start) shut down in early spring 2020 because of COVID-19 and state "safer at home" orders. That impacted the nutrition and food access of Menominee County families, where 89 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Extension's Menominee County/Nation partnered with Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin's Early Childcare Services Department and Shawano County Farm Bureau to alleviate concerns of continuing to provide locally purchased foods and donations to families. This effort resulted in milk purchased and distributed to 254 children twice this summer. Further, there was enough milk to share with other schools including the Menominee Tribal School and Menominee Keshena Primary School. One Head Start parent commented that this helped prevent extra trips to the grocery store and helped to keep their family safe.



Read more about Extension's successes and impacts supporting communities responding to COVID-19 at fyi.extension.wisc.edu/covid19/impacts