CFAES assists Ohio food producers, consumers amid COVID-19

The local food supply is there, despite what you might see in some grocery stores.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused food processing disruptions and distribution link breaks in the food chain system nationwide, the local food system has adapted to overcome these challenges.

Local growers and producers have continued to plant, harvest, and market food so consumers can access food products, said Christie Welch, CFAES direct food and agriculture marketing specialist. However, Ohio farmers have been affected by the pandemic due to closures and stay-at-home orders. Livestock producers and specialty produce growers have needed to adapt their plans in response to radically shifted markets and public health concerns.

To help, CFAES convened two new groups in March. The COVID-19 Crisis Working Group for Specialty Crop Producers is helping Ohio’s small- to mid-sized producers who sell to direct markets, restaurants, institutions, retailers, and wholesale outlets. The CFAES Lean on Your Land Grant Food Supply Chain Task Force is helping livestock producers, many of whom sell to the same outlets.

Composed of OSU Extension personnel, farm organizations, commodity groups, and farmers, the two groups identify challenges, provide guidance, answer questions, and support farmers, producers, and consumers.

For example, the working group collaborates with The Ohio State University Fruit and Vegetable Safety Team to provide science-based recommendations on the best operating practices for farms during the pandemic. The group explores online sales, shares information from Ohio food regulators, and connects Ohio food producers with information about disaster assistance.

The working group has also created fact sheets and webinars about COVID-19 and produce safety, reaching new markets, pivoting to new marketing platforms, and navigating government programs for small businesses. It also provides guidance on good hygiene.

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Helping the agricultural community at home

When stay-at-home orders began due to the COVID-19 pandemic, OSU Extension was inundated with calls.

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With 3.5 million livestock produced in Ohio and an estimated 400 meat and poultry facilities statewide, meat production remains a critical necessity. Pandemic closures of meatpacking plants nationwide have caused many farmers to keep ready-for-market livestock on their farms, resulting in many farmers reducing flocks or herds through euthanasia.

“If we had written reports, by the time we got the reports out, the facts likely would have changed.”

Offered weekly in early spring and now offered twice monthly, Farm Office Live gives people a chance to hear from experts in areas ranging from tax law to dairy economics. Besides Brown, experts include Barry Ward, director of OSU Extension’s Income Tax School; Peggy Hall, OSU Extension agricultural and resource law field specialist; David Marrison, OSU Extension educator; and Dianne Shoemaker, OSU Extension field specialist in dairy production economics.

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“When isn’t the preferred answer,” Garcia said. “We’ve implemented other steps with producers, including slowing the animals’ growth rate while keeping them healthy.”

Economic forecasts delivered weekly

Want the latest economic outlook in the agriculture industry? Tune in to a weekly video presented by Ben Brown, CFAES assistant professor of agricultural risk management.

The economic updates cover a range of topics from ethanol production to soybean export levels.

“What I hope is that listeners become more knowledgeable about grain markets and can, therefore, make better decisions about selling old or new crops,” Brown said.

Recordings of the weekly economic updates can be found at go.osu.edu/farmoffice.
In a time of pandemic and staying at home, gardening gets you out into fresh air and sunshine, keeps you socially distanced, and yields healthy food for your family.

Call it, yes, a victory garden—one that stretches your food budget, limits your time in the grocery store, and helps ease the strain on food supply chains.

So how, now that your garden is growing, can you keep it strong all summer long?

Tim McDermott, an OSU Extension educator who runs the “Growing Franklin” food-growing blog (u.osu.edu/growingfranklin), shares his top six tips, especially for beginners.

1. Test your soil. A soil test will tell if your crops have the pH and nutrients needed for big, healthy crops. Learn more from the CFAES fact sheets at go.osu.edu/allaboutsoiltesting and at go.osu.edu/franklinsoiltest.

2. Use mulch. Spreading mulch on top of your soil will help it stay cool and conserve moisture—keys in the dog days of summer. “Your plants will be happier because of it,” McDermott says. Try grass clippings, composted leaves, plastic film, sawdust, hay, or straw. Mulch also helps suppress weeds.

3. Consider containers. Not enough room for a garden? Or wanting to add to what you’ve started? Consider growing crops in containers. “It’s a great way to grow fruit, vegetables, and herbs in small spaces,” McDermott says. Learn more in his blog post at go.osu.edu/containergarden1 and his webinar at go.osu.edu/containergarden2.

4. Give enough water. Garden plants need about an inch of water a week—but might need more in hot weather.

5. Nix weeds. Nip any weeds in the bud—literally or figuratively, as the case may be. Tackle them early; don’t let them go to seed. “It’s easier to stop one plant instead of many,” McDermott says.

6. Plan for fall. Fall is a great time for gardens. “The rain comes back, there’s plenty of daylight, and the bugs start to go away,” McDermott says. “Plus, pollinators are looking for food.” Kale, Swiss chard, spinach, and lettuce are some of the good crops for autumn.

“Remember that your growing is supported by OSU Extension,” McDermott adds. “We have offices in all 88 counties as well as Ask a Master Gardener and Ask an Expert help lines (go.osu.edu/askamastergardener and go.osu.edu/extensionaskanexpert).

“Feel free to contact us for assistance. We want to help you succeed.”

Got a garden? Lean on your land grant

Lots of Ohioans started gardening this spring, some for the very first time, possibly including you.
The best week of summer

Ohio 4-H camp went virtual for the first time this summer.

Because a summer without camp, delivered by OSU Extension’s Ohio 4-H youth development program, was not an option, Extension educators developed safe alternatives for campers amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Held in June, “Camp...ish” was the first-ever, three-day, statewide virtual camp during which campers “attended” up to three daily sessions featuring live interaction and videos via Zoom.

Activities included typical camp rituals such as a flag ceremony, reciting the 4-H pledge, theme days, and craft instruction. New efforts suited to home-based camping included virtual campfires, songs, and campers building their own tents or blanket fortresses at home, said Kayla Oberstadt, 4-H program manager.

There was no reluctance from 4-H members in embracing the virtual camp. More than 350 youth registered for Camp...ish in less than 24 hours!

In Muskingum County, 4-H members participated in “Not a Camp,” during which they had s’mores, a sidewalk chalk challenge, and a talent show performed through videos and live interactions.

Because not everyone has internet access, “Camp at Home” was created for families to set up camp inside or outside and engage in typical camp activities including tents, singing, cooking, and playing games, said Jamie McConnell, an OSU Extension educator.

“Campers sent in photos of their experience, which will be displayed online for a ‘people’s choice’ vote, with the winners receiving camp scholarships for the 2021 Muskingum County Camp,” she said.

At 4-H Camp Palmer in Fulton County, the theme became “Adventure is calling, but we stayed home,” using a “Camp in a Box.” For $55, campers received a flash drive with instructional videos, supplies for crafts, recipes, and a T-shirt. Orders were received from across Ohio and from Camp Palmer alumni in New York, North Carolina, and Germany!

The ultimate goal for all Ohio 4-H campers was to ensure that their summer could still include camp, McConnell said.

“I was as sad as anyone that we couldn’t go to camp,” she said. “But this was a learning experience. It’s about how to persevere and that life doesn’t always go the way we expect, so we’ll help our young people manage those feelings, learn something new, and use those skills later in life.”

Ask a financial expert

Many Ohioans struggling financially have questions. To help, OSU Extension offers free financial education to assist families with improving both their present and future economic well-being. Consumers can submit questions anonymously to the Ask a Financial Expert site (go.osu.edu/financialadvice) and get a response emailed to them within five days.