



Keeping you connected

extension cord

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DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
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Extension Homemakers to start 2026 with new lessons

As 2026 gets underway, many people may be working on familiar resolutions — to get healthier, manage money better, or learn something new — in the new year. Arkansas Extension Homemakers Clubs offer a way to accomplish all three goals and more.

For the first four months of the year, EHC clubs will offer monthly programs focused on a specialty area within Extension's Family and Consumer Sciences division — including health, nutrition, personal finance and family life.

The 2026 featured lessons include:

- **January** — Health and Well-being - Living a Healthier Life through the 8 Dimensions of Wellness
- **February** — Family Life - Smartphone Smarts: A Guide to Healthier Scrolling Habits
- **March** — Nutrition - Stay Safe: Food, Fundraisers, Potlucks & Picnics
- **April** — Personal Finance - Consumer Protection: How to Avoid the Latest Scams

"The curricula are written by state specialists who are experts in their field," said Laura Hendrix, statewide adviser for EHC clubs and extension's personal finance expert. "I encourage clubs to offer these programs across the state."



Extension Homemakers learn chair yoga.

Extension Homemakers, one of the state's largest volunteer organizations, is part of the Cooperative Extension Service, the outreach arm of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. EHC's three-part mission is to empower people through informal education in Family and Consumer Sciences, leadership development, and community service.

In 2025, EHC clubs in Arkansas reported a combined 5,040 volunteers who contributed 337,778 volunteer hours, valued at \$11.7 million.

Save the Date!

The **2026 Spring Retiree Meeting** is Tuesday, March 31!
10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. | C. A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center
No. 1 4-H Way, Little Rock, AR 72223

THE INSIDE STORIES

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Bradley County's John Gavin celebrates long, fruitful career as tomato expert

Bradley County Extension Agent John Gavin has long been the go-to expert on tomato production — so much that producers and colleague affectionately refer to him as ‘Tomato John’ and ‘Dr. Tomato’ for his extensive tomato expertise.

After 42 years of service to the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Gavin retired at the end of 2025.

More than 100 current and former colleagues, tomato producers and community members celebrated his long, fruitful career at a reception Dec. 17 at the Warren County Club.

“It has been an honor and privilege to serve the people of Arkansas through extension,” Gavin said. “Over the years, I have enjoyed working alongside dedicated colleagues and community partners to advance agriculture, education and outreach. The relationships we’ve built and the impact we’ve made together have been deeply fulfilling and will remain highlights of my professional life.”

John Anderson, head of the Cooperative Extension Service, said the impact of Gavin’s work will continue to be felt in Bradley County and beyond.

“John Gavin has been a fixture in Arkansas Cooperative Extension for over four decades. His expertise in tomato production is legendary,” Anderson said. “Beyond his impressive subject matter expertise, though, John has been a mentor to countless extension agents and specialists over the years. His commitment to the organization and to the community that he has served with great distinction is

an example that we would all do well to follow. We certainly wish John all the best in his well-earned retirement, but he will certainly be missed.”

Gavin started his extension career in 1984 as an agent in Nevada County, worked in Union County extension from 1988-1990, and has been Bradley County’s agriculture extension agent for the past 35 years.

He’s knows just about every tomato producer in Bradley County as well as in surrounding counties that comprise Arkansas’ primary tomato-producing region.

There’s even a bit of competition among producers as to who will deliver the first box of tomatoes to the Bradley County Extension Office, an event that unofficially signals the start of tomato season in Arkansas. Those “first” boxes go on display at the Bradley County Pink Tomato Festival, which Gavin has helped with for many years. In 2014, he was inducted into the Bradley County Pink Tomato Festival Hall of Fame.

Read more [here](#).



Bradley County Ag Extension Agent John Gavin is retiring. His wife, Sandy, and son, Weston, joined him at his retirement reception.

Ag industry seeks light at the end of the tunnel

Following one of agriculture’s darkest years, some farmers are looking for anything that might improve the bottom line, while others are looking for the exit.

Deacue Fields, an agricultural economist who is head of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, put it bluntly: “The agricultural economy right now is probably in one of the most depressing states that I’ve seen in my career.”

For most row crop farmers, a bigger harvest didn’t translate into bigger profits. It translated into bigger losses.

Net farm income in Arkansas was expected to decline 8 percent from 2024 levels to \$2.91 billion in 2025, according to a report

from the Rural and Farm Finance Policy Analysis Center, or RaFF, working with agricultural economists from the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Economists projected a further decrease in crop receipts this year.

“Growers are looking for every way to improve margins,” Stiles said. “That will require a combination of capturing opportunities in the market — such as we’ve seen over the past month in soybeans.

“In recent visits with growers, most are and have been deferring equipment purchases,” he said. “Some are renegotiating farm

Cooperative Extension Service to host first Grow Your Own Groceries Conference

The Cooperative Extension Service's online Grow Your Own Groceries Series has been so popular that organizers will host the first in-person Grow Your Own Groceries Conference in 2026.

Like the monthly webinars, the conference will provide expertise on growing and preparing food.

The one-day conference will be Feb. 10 from 8 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. at the Conway Expo and Events Center, 2505 E. Oak St, Conway. Online registration is open until Jan. 31. The cost is \$75 and includes access to sessions and demonstrations on nearly a dozen topics with lunch included.

"We're excited to take the virtual Grow Your Own Groceries program to the next level with this in-person conference," Faulkner County extension agent Krista Quinn said. "We've been planning the conference for a little over a year now, and we're delighted to offer presentations from some of Arkansas' most knowledgeable experts on a variety of gardening and food preparation topics that have been suggested by our virtual viewers. It will be a great opportunity to share information and experiences with each other and help us all to be more successful producing our own food."

The Grow Your Own series started in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way for extension experts to share research-based information with home gardeners on how to grow and prepare fresh produce. Quinn and Faulkner County Family and Consumer Science Agent Mary Beth Groce originally planned to host four sessions that year, but viewers wanted more.

In the five years since, they've hosted 77 presentations that have reached more than 28,000 people in 57 Arkansas counties, 31 states and seven countries. More than 30 extension

staff have presented during the series.

"One of the keys to our success is having the support of so many agents and specialists who share their expertise with the public," Quinn said. "With so many extension contributors, it's been a truly powerful program."

Participants were surveyed, and 95 percent said they gained knowledge about growing food and cooking skills they will use, Quinn said.

At the conference, extension agents and educators will share expertise on topics ranging from planning a harvest to preparing the soil to preserving food.

Former Arkansas Master Gardener program coordinator and gardening guru Janet Carson and Randy Forst, the current Master Gardener program coordinator, will give a luncheon keynote presentation titled "Pick and Plant," inspired by the classic humor and charm of the long-running radio show, "Car Talk" with Click and Clack.

As Click and Clack did under the hood, Carson and Forst will "diagnose" garden woes, swap stories from the soil, and share expert tips for getting the most out of your backyard bounty. They'll share some of their favorite crops to plant, care for and eat.

Read more [here](#).



UADA winter production meeting calendar available online

At a time when making the most of every cent, minute and acre counts, this year's winter production meetings focus on improving a farm's bottom line and mitigating negative impacts.

The annual winter meetings — focused by commodity and county — will feature extension agronomists and economists from the Division of Agriculture.

The [annual production calendar is available online](#). Many details are still in the works, so attendees should contact their county extension agent for times and locations.

The slate of 23 meetings began Jan. 8 for Clay and Greene counties and ends March 24 in Mississippi and Crittenden counties. Read more [here](#).

February Birthdays

Melody Curtis - Feb. 1
Michael McClintock - Feb. 1
Phillip Sims - Feb. 1
Leo Espinoza - Feb. 1
Bobby Huey - Feb. 2
Booker Clemons Jr. - Feb. 2
Charlotte Chitwood - Feb. 2
Brenda Waldrum - Feb. 2
Bob Reynolds - Feb. 3
Larry Sandage - Feb. 3
Carol Patterson - Feb. 4
Beverly Henderson-Vincent - Feb. 4

Edward Rhodes Jr. - Feb. 4
Fran Tomerlin - Feb. 5
Mark Phillips - Feb. 5
Sheila Brandt - Feb. 5
Belinda Miller - Feb. 6
Dora Dinnan - Feb. 7
Beverly Hines - Feb. 7
Marie Corbin - Feb. 9
Catherine Koch - Feb. 9
Allan Beuerman - Feb. 9
Ella Geisler - Feb. 10
Jimmie Gooch - Feb. 10

Joy Buffalo - Feb. 10
Steve Rodery - Feb. 11
Yvonne McCool - Feb. 11
Ann Ward - Feb. 12
Keith Lusby - Feb. 13
Sharon Lillard - Feb. 15
Brian Helms - Feb. 16
Paula Seago - Feb. 18
Lynda Lee - Feb. 20
Delores Sowerbrower - Feb. 21
Denise Murdoch - Feb. 22
Larry Holeman - Feb. 22

Gerald Van Brunt - Feb. 23
Rebecca Thomas - Feb. 23
Doyne Potts - Feb. 24
Robert Felsman - Feb. 24
Jeri Vangilder - Feb. 24
Charles Johnston - Feb. 26
Clara Garrett - Feb. 26
James Geisler - Feb. 27
Larry Keaton - Feb. 27
Linda Simpson - Feb. 27
Carole Scaramuzza - Feb. 28

Message from the director



I am writing this month's article from the basement of my house where I am currently – like many of you, I'm sure – snowed in. Winter weather is no surprise in January. Still, it is an unwelcome interruption in the middle of the busy meeting season.

One of the more important events that we have had going on this January that is not a regular feature of the annual calendar is training CES personnel on our new reporting software: PEARS (Program Evaluation and Reporting System). The AIMS program has been retired after a long and distinguished career, and the rollout of the PEARS program that will replace it is proceeding apace. Stacey McCullough's team in CPED has been working on this transition for a long time. They have invested a great deal of time and energy into setting up the PEARS program for launch and developing a strong set of training tools and user resources to make sure our personnel can hit the ground running with the new program. We started county agent training on the program a couple of weeks ago. That training has been interrupted by the recent inclement weather, but we will be back on track soon enough.

Most people don't get too enthusiastic about a new software rollout. Learning a new program can be a challenge, and unless you happen to be an IT professional, that is probably not the main focus of your job. Also, software rollouts have a reputation for being more difficult than advertised. (I'm looking at you, Workday.) But sometimes change is necessary. That was certainly the case with respect to our reporting program.

More optimistically, change can also create great new opportunities. In the present case, PEARS provides a couple of key opportunities for us to improve our current reporting. On the front end, PEARS is a more user-friendly system for entering Extension activities and impacts. The program is easy to learn, and once users have learned the basics, I am confident that we'll

be able to enter better, more complete data in less time than we could in AIMS. On the back end, PEARS makes summarizing and reporting data much easier than anything we have had before. The program provides data access and built-in data visualization tools that will allow us to show stakeholders and policymakers what we are doing and the impact we are having like never before.

I was able to attend three or four of the PEARS training sessions for county agents before the weather shut us down. Overall, I would say that when people see the program in operation – with respect both to data entry and reporting of results – they like it. I'm sure we'll have some wrinkles to smooth out before we are through, but I'm encouraged by the great start we have had to the rollout so far.



Update to Retiree Billing Description

UMR has moved the retiree billing system to the Cobra billing system, therefore, **the deduction name was changed by the UMR financial institution to "UMR Cobra"**. Please rest assured that your coverage has not been canceled, or moved to Cobra, and that these payments are for the same retiree coverage that you were paying for in the past. Please feel free to reach out to UMR with any questions or concerns at 800.207.1824. Our apologies for any confusion.

Ag industry, cont.

leases. Some are walking away from leases that aren't working in the current environment.

"Unfortunately, some are exiting farming altogether; some voluntarily and some involuntarily," Stiles said.

"Strong yields are not enough," he said. "Marketing, cost management, and maximizing farm program benefits will all need equal time and attention going forward."

Comparing the Division of Agriculture's 2025 and 2026 budgets, input costs are similar, though some inputs have eased.

Loy said that "operating expenses are relatively unchanged, adding more fuel to the cost-squeeze fire.

"For soybeans to reach breakeven, the budget was reworked to remove a second pass for weed control, he said. "This was a way to trim the budget for soybean in this high-cost environment.

"Overall, there is very little relief expected in 2026; margins will still be tight, and row crop prices will remain low," Loy said. Read more [here](#).