

February - March 2026



Extension - Spencer County

Our Mission

We deliver practical, research-based information that enhances lives and livelihoods.

Our Vision

We will be a leader in providing relevant, high-impact educational programs that transform the lives and livelihoods of individuals and communities in Indiana and the world.

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Ag Agenda

Agriculture & Horticulture Update for the Home and Farm



Financial Stress, Labor Decisions, and Farm Resilience: Tools to Evaluate Your Operation

Bringing another person into the farm operation — whether a family member returning to the farm or a new employee — is one of the most important financial decisions a business can make. While the conversation often focuses on roles, responsibilities, and transition planning, the financial capacity of the operation must come first.

At recent Farm Shield Conferences in Kokomo and Bloomington, Michael Langemeier discussed the current financial environment and how it affects farm expansion decisions, especially labor. Higher interest rates, tighter margins, and increased capital costs mean farms have less room for financial strain than in recent years.

Before adding labor, farms should evaluate three key questions:

1. Is gross income large enough to support another person?
2. Is the farm consistently profitable enough?
3. After adding labor, can the business still meet term debt obligations and replace machinery and other assets on time?

These questions focus on immediate feasibility. (*continued on page 2*)

Nicholas Held, Extension Educator
Agriculture & Natural Resources
Community Development

Newsletter Highlights

Are Autonomous Farm Machines Economically Ready Yet?

Advice for First-time Gardeners

Indiana Horticulture and Small Farm Conference

OISC Core & Cat. I4 Training & Testing



Extension - Spencer County

Stress(*cont.*)

However, long-term success also depends on farm resilience — the ability to withstand and adapt to strategic risks such as policy changes, market disruptions, weather variability, and technological shifts.

To help farms evaluate both financial readiness and resilience, the following tools are available:

Agility and Absorption Capacity Assessment (available at ag.purdue.edu/commercialag/home/resource/2023/04/agility-and-absorption-capacity/)

This questionnaire helps farms evaluate their ability to:

- Identify and capture opportunities (agility)
- Withstand financial and operational shocks (absorption capacity)

Key factors include goal clarity, cost structure, diversification, and balance sheet strength.

Farm Business Goals Assessment (available at ag.purdue.edu/commercialag/home/resource/2025/07/farm-goals/)

This tool helps operators clarify and prioritize business goals such as profitability, income stability, environmental stewardship, succession, and debt reduction — all of which influence labor and growth decisions.

Together, these tools support more informed decisions about labor expansion, risk exposure, and long-term business resilience.

-Michael Langemeier, Director, Center for Commercial Agriculture and Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University

Are Autonomous Farm Machines Economically Ready Yet?

Autonomous farm machinery is advancing quickly — but is it ready to pencil out on commercial grain farms?

Autonomous machinery continues to draw attention as a potential solution to labor constraints and operational efficiency challenges in production agriculture. A recent study

evaluates whether large-scale autonomous machinery systems are economically competitive with conventional, human-operated equipment under current conditions.

The analysis used a farm-level optimization framework (the old Purdue Crop Linear Programming Model (PCLP)) to evaluate how autonomous machinery would fit into a realistic Midwestern corn/soybean farm. Instead of focusing only on engineering performance, the study looked at the full business picture, including:

- Field efficiency of autonomous machines
- Initial hardware purchases
- Ongoing software or subscription fees
- Labor requirements and wage rates
- Machinery and whole-farm logistics



Results indicate that, given today's technology performance and cost structures, autonomous machinery is generally not yet cost-competitive with conventional equipment on commercial grain farms (Purdue Center for Commercial Agriculture)

These modeling choices allowed autonomous systems to be evaluated alongside traditional machinery within the context of overall farm profitability and operational constraints.

Key Finding: Labor Costs are the Tipping Point

Results indicate that, given today's technology performance and cost structures, autonomous machinery is **generally not yet cost-competitive** with conventional equipment on commercial grain farms. Higher capital costs and recurring technology fees currently offset labor savings in most baseline scenarios.

Labor availability and cost ultimately determine whether autonomy pencils out. When labor cannot be secured, autonomous machinery offers a viable alternative to idling acres.

(continued on page 3)

Autonomous (*cont.*)

But for farms with access to hired labor, current autonomous systems remain difficult to justify economically. Under today's performance assumptions, labor wages would need to rise above **\$140 per hour** before autonomous machinery generates higher returns than conventional equipment.

Likely Path of Adoption

Rather than immediate, whole-farm substitution, the findings point toward a more gradual adoption path. Autonomous systems may initially be justified for operations willing to trade some financial return for lifestyle or management benefits. Beyond these cases, economic viability is more likely to emerge in specific field operations where autonomy addresses particular constraints.

Under current conditions, individual operators should carefully evaluate the economic tradeoffs. In the future, improvements in operating efficiency and reductions in software or service fees will improve the economic outlook.

Broader Farm Management Implications

The study emphasizes that autonomous machinery decisions extend beyond equipment replacement. Adoption has implications for:

- Machinery investment structure
- Labor strategy and workforce management
- Crop diversification
- Long-term farm scalability

For Midwest corn and soybean farms, the question is less "Will autonomy come?" and more "When will the autonomy performance and costs align with our labor situation and growth plans?"

–Chad Fiechter, Assistant Professor, Agricultural Economics, Purdue University and Josh Strine, PhD student, Purdue AgEcon

A companion episode of the **Purdue Commercial AgCast** features the authors discussing the methodology, key findings, and practical implications for farm managers.

Listen to the podcast, Episode 206:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.atech.2025.101599>

Advice for First-time Gardeners: Start Small

If you are new to vegetable gardening or could just use a little refresher, the following reprinted article from retired Purdue Extension Consumer Horticulture Specialist Rosie Lerner may be useful as you make your 2026 plans:

As so many of us are spending much more time at home these days, this might be the perfect time to think about starting a vegetable garden! In addition to adding fresh produce to your diet, gardening can offer both physical and mental therapeutic benefits.

Anyone can develop a green thumb, as long as they're willing to invest a little time, patience and elbow grease.

Good planning is essential to successful gardening. Start your garden off right by selecting a location that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight daily, if possible. Good drainage of excess water is critical. Observe the site during these rainy days to avoid areas where water tends to stand. Try to steer clear of trees and shrubs that would compete with your garden plants for water, light and nutrients. Walnut trees in particular produce a substance called juglone that is toxic to some garden plants.

Once you've selected your site, sketch your plans on paper. Decide how big the garden will be, what crops you want to grow and where to place them. Beginners tend to go overboard, not realizing how much work lies ahead. It's best to start out small and gradually add to your patch each year as needed. A 100-square-foot plot should be plenty for your first venture. Or consider making a small raised bed garden. Those without adequate space can consider gardening in containers. Many different vegetables will produce well in Indiana. Most new gardeners start out by picking up a few seed packets at their local grocery. This is an acceptable way to get started, although there is no guarantee that the cultivars of vegetables being sold are best suited for Indiana conditions. Garden centers are more likely to have a wider choice available. More-experienced gardeners often order online to supplement what is available from local garden centers, taking time to pick out cultivars that have the particular characteristics they're interested in.

Before heading out to the garden to plant, you'll need to gather some tools and properly prepare the soil. (*continued on page 4*)

Garden (cont.)

A hoe, rake, spade, sprinkler, string and stakes are about the minimum tool supply you'll need. It's a good idea to have your soil tested as early as possible to learn how much of what kind of fertilizer to apply.

Next, prepare a good planting bed, but make sure the soil has dried sufficiently before you work it. Working wet soil will damage the soil's structure. Squeeze a handful of soil, and if it crumbles away easily, it's ready. If it sticks together in a muddy ball, you'd better hold off. When it's ready, work the soil at least 6 inches deep. A rototiller makes this job pretty easy, but for small plots a spade and strong arms will do. Then rake the soil surface level.

Most seed packages will list planting directions such as depth and spacing. When setting out transplants, be sure to dig a hole larger than the soil ball of the plant to aid root establishment. Most transplants are sold in containers that must be removed before planting. The exception is those sold in peat pots (brown, fibrous pots) that can be planted but do need a little modification. Tear off the rim of peat pots to ensure that no part of the pot will stick out of the soil. And, if roots are not growing out of the bottom of the pot already, it's helpful to tear or poke holes through the bottom of the pot to allow for easier root penetration. Transplants dry out and wilt rapidly, so be sure to get those transplants watered thoroughly as soon as possible.

The job doesn't end with planting. There are always weeds, insects and diseases to battle. There are numerous cultural types of controls and preventive measures along with chemicals. No one chemical will control all problems on all crops, so you'll need to identify your problem correctly and then choose the proper control strategy. A pesticide is not necessarily the best method.


 The poster for the 2026 Indiana Horticulture and Small Farm Conference. It features the Purdue University Extension logo at the top. The year '2026' is prominently displayed in large, bold, black letters. Below that, the conference title 'INDIANA HORTICULTURE AND SMALL FARM CONFERENCE' is written in large, bold, white letters. Underneath the title, the dates 'March 3-5' are listed in white. Below the dates, the location 'Hendricks County Fairgrounds 1900 E. Main St. • Danville, Indiana' is given in white. At the bottom, there is a call to action 'REGISTER TODAY!' in white, followed by the website 'HTTPS://PUEXT.IN/IHSFC26' in white.

Contact Us!

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 [Purdue Extension-Spencer County](https://www.youtube.com/PurdueExtensionSpencerCounty)

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■ OISC CORE and Category 14 Training and Testing

This training is for pesticide applicators needing to take the core or agriculture fertilizer applicator exams. Other category testing can be scheduled for afternoon; but no subject matter is taught.

MARCH 11, 2026

8:30 am to 11 am CT : Core Training
11am to Noon - Cat 14 Training
11 am to 4pm CT: Testing

Ivy Tech Community College RM 107
3501 N First Ave, Evansville, IN 47710

For more Information and to Register

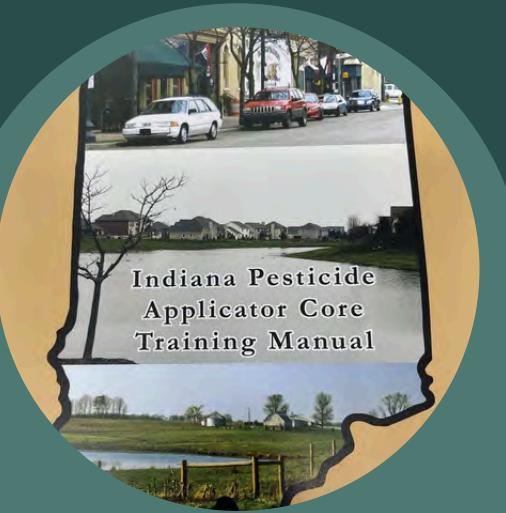
Email: aheidenr@purdue.edu
812-385-3491 by March 6th!

Purdue University is an equal opportunity/equal access/affirmative action institution.



PURDUE
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Extension - Agriculture
and Natural Resources



Registration required.

*To register for the exam(s) at Ivy Tech visit <http://indiana.metrosignup.com> to sign-up. There will be a \$55 fee. To select the March 12th testing date- you need a **PASSWORD**. Register at 812-385-3491 FIRST to receive password. There are limited spaces so sign-up early!

*Training manuals are available (\$40+shipping) from The Purdue Education Store and can be ordered by calling 765-494-6794.

*If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this program, at least one week prior to the meeting contact Abby at Purdue Extension Gibson County 812-385-3491 or aheidenr@purdue.edu

THE SOIL SCOOP



Spencer County Soil and Water Conservation District

FREE SOIL TESTING AVAILABLE FOR GARDENS

PUSH-IT (Promoting Urban Soil Health-In Towns) has continued their partnership with Small Farms Conservation to continue the free sampling of gardens in the county.

As a member of PUSH-IT, Spencer Co. SWCD is offering **FREE** soil sample of gardens for 2026.

If interested in getting a **FREE** soil sample, contact the Spencer Co. SWCD Office at (812) 649-9136

These samples are for small scale vegetable and fruit operations. Each interested party will be eligible for **TWO FREE** soil samples.

NEW CWI GRANT FOR 2025-27

We have been awarded a CWI grant for 2025-2027!

This grant includes HUAPS, cover crops, internal fencing, and a watering facility.

First time grant recipients are prioritized, then it will become first come first served in application acceptance. Must follow NRCS guidelines that require a resource concern evaluation before acceptance.

To request an application, contact the Spencer Co. SWCD office.

(812) 649-9136

Thank you for your continued interest in this conservation practice.

STRANGE BUT TRUE AG FACTS

Pigs can run a seven-minute mile.

If you've ever been stuck in a pen with an angry sow, you know it's best to get out of the way. But did you know that the average human runner can cover one mile in seven to 10 minutes? On the flip side, pigs can run a mile in seven minutes. That means your odds of winning a race against a pig may be slimmer than you thought.

(provided by FFA.org)

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NATURE DOES NOT HURRY, YET EVERYTHING IS ACCOMPLISHED.

-Lao Tzu



February- March 2026 4-H Newsletter

4-H Registration & Drop/Add

4-H Registration is still open if you have not registered for this year. Bring a friend to a club meeting or workshop and help them join 4-H too! If you haven't registered yet for this year please go to v2.4honline.com to register.

If you need to drop or add a project please email Jennifer (allen393@purdue.edu) or Kara (kdilger@purdue.edu) with the project you would like to drop/add. Reminder, the deadline for dropping/adding projects is May 15th.

4-H Camp Counselor & NEW Jr. Camp Counselors

4-H Camp Counselor applications are open and will be through 4HOnline. When you go to your profile and click the "Event" tab, you will see "4-H Camp: Gibson, Knox, Pike, Posey, Spencer & Vanderburgh Counties". Please answer all the questions before submitting your application. Camp will be **June 1-3** with Counselors arriving **May 31st** for their final counselor training. The Camp Counselor training dates will be **April 21st and May 5th** at VU Ft. Branch from 4:30-6:30.

New this year we will offer Jr. Camp Counselors. This is for 7th and 8th grade youth that are not able to attend camp as campers, but would like to learn how to become counselors. There will be no overnight accommodations, so these youth will need transportation to and from camp in the morning and evening. They will help lead activities and have an introductory experience to being a 4-H Camp Counselor.

Trip Applications

Trip applications are available in 4HOnline for all current 7th-12th graders under the "Events" tab. You will select "Spencer County 4-H Trip Applications" and answer all questions before you submit. Award winners will be presented at the Pork Chop Dinner on Saturday, February 28th.

4-H Camp

Spencer County 4-H Camp will be June 1-3 at the Historic Santa Claus Campground for current grades 3-6. Applications will again be completed through 4HOnline this year and be \$65. Our 4-H Association offsets the cost of each 4-H'er attending camp and pays the other \$55 it requires us to attend camp. Please help continue to make this possible by attending events such as the Pork Chop Dinner on February 28th!

Camp applications will be available hopefully in March once we have all approved volunteers and counselors enrolled in 4HOnline. Once that is approved by campus, we will be allowed to open 4-H Camp. This event fills quickly every year. Please be on the lookout for an email for more details about 4-H Camp and if you are planning to attend, register early!

Pork Chop Dinner

Save the date for the Spencer County 4-H Pork Chop Dinner **Saturday February 28th** with dinner beginning at 5 PM and the auction directly following. Tickets are available at the office or from any board member for \$15.

All the proceeds raised from the Pork Chop Dinner & Auction directly benefit the youth in Spencer County 4-H. Funds are used for 4-H trips such as Academy and Round-Up, camp, project workshops, 4-H books and program supplies, and many other things. If you would like to make a donation towards the auction or the 4-H program, please contact Jennifer or Kara at the office (812) 362-8066. Please come out and support our program!

4-H Fair Updates & Reminder

The 4-H Fair will be June 26th- 29th with clean up after fair on June 30th. We will begin setting up for the fair on Saturday, June 20th. It takes all of us to make the buildings and grounds ready for the projects and animals, so please plan accordingly and plan to help us for a few hours.

The **Ambassador Contest** is scheduled for Saturday, June 20th. New this year, we will also have **Fashion Revue** on the 20th with the Ambassador Contest. More information will be sent soon, but both the Ambassador Contest and Fashion Revue will be in the afternoon. Project check-in will be on Monday June 22nd in the evening. Mark your calendars and start working on projects early!

HEALTH & HUMAN SCIENCES

Bringing University information to the local level to strengthen families, spend smart, eat right, and live well.

Mental Health First Aid

Adult Mental Health First Aid

Adult Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based course that teaches participants:

- How to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis.
- Signs and symptoms for a variety of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance use, trauma, and deliberate self-injury.
- Awareness and understanding of the impact mental health and substance use stigma can have.
- How to assist those in need to get help from a health professional.

Adult Mental Health First Aid (in-person blended course) includes:

2 hours online self-paced training, one full day of in-person training, a Mental Health First Aid participant manual, a Mental Health First Aid participant processing guide, refreshments and lunch.

Similar to becoming certified in CPR, there is a requirement that to be certified in Adult Mental Health First Aid, participants must attend and participate in the entire course.

Youth Mental Health First Aid

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is a skills-based training that teaches adults who work with youth how to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health or substance use challenges. This program builds health literacy and offers participants a practical action plan for how to identify and address youth with a mental health or substance use challenge safely and responsibly.

Youth Mental Health First Aid (in-person blended course) includes:

Registration includes 2 hours online self-paced training, one full day of in-person training, a Mental Health First Aid participant manual, refreshments and lunch.

Similar to becoming certified in CPR, there is a requirement that to be certified in Mental Health First Aid, participants must attend and participate in the entire course.

See enclosed fliers upcoming training opportunities

Future Directions

HHS Extension continues to look forward, evolving and expanding our work to create healthier Indiana communities.

In 2026 and beyond, we will focus our efforts on:

- Equipping parents and caregivers of children (ages 0-5) with knowledge and skills to foster positive, supportive and responsive parenting through a podcast series.
- Promoting a practical approach to reducing the risk of chronic disease through an evidence-based program, **Steps to a Healthy You**, which combines a Mediterranean-style eating pattern with mindfulness techniques.

CONNECT WITH US:

EXTENSION.PURDUE.EDU/HHS



Mental Health **FIRST AID**

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID - FOR ADULTS WHO WORK WITH YOUTH

WHERE:

VU AGRICULTURAL CENTER
ROOM 102
4207 N. PURDUE RD.
VINCENNES, IN 47591

WHEN:

TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026
10 AM - 4 PM ET
9 AM - 3 PM CT



Extension

WWW.PURDUE.EDU/HHS/EXTENSION/MHFA

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WHAT IS YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is a skills-based training that teaches adults who work with youth how to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health or substance use challenges.

This program builds health literacy and offers participants a practical action plan for how to identify and address youth with a mental health or substance use challenge safely and responsibly.

COURSE COST: \$50

The registration fee for this course is offered at a discounted rate as a service to our community by Purdue Extension and funded by Glick Philanthropies.

REGISTER BY:

Friday, February 13, 2026
Advance sign-up and online pre-work required.

FOR COURSE QUESTIONS CONTACT:

Megan Hoffherr; mkron@purdue.edu; (812) 867-4935
Carla Kidwell; kidwellc@purdue.edu; (812) 897-6100

TO LEARN MORE AND REGISTER:

<https://YMHFA.4honline.com>

If you are in need of accommodations to attend this program, please contact Megan Hoffherr at (812) 867-4935 or mkron@purdue.edu by February 13, 2026.

If you need an interpreter or translator, please contact Megan Hoffherr at (812) 867-4935 or mkron@purdue.edu by February 13, 2026.

For special dietary needs or questions about the course location, contact Tonya Short at (812) 882-3509 or short43@purdue.edu by February 13, 2026.



Mental Health **FIRST AID**

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

LOCATION
WELBORN COMMUNITY ROOM
20 NW 3RD ST
EVANSVILLE, IN 47708

MARCH 4, 2026
8:30 AM - 3:30 PM
CENTRAL TIME



Extension

WWW.PURDUE.EDU/HHS/EXTENSION/MHFA

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WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a skills-based training that teaches people how to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health or substance use challenges.

This program builds health literacy and offers participants a practical action plan for how to identify and address someone with a mental health or substance use challenge safely and responsibly.

COST

\$130 (includes a manual, participant processing guide, access to the online resources, and materials and refreshments the day of class)

SIGN UP BY

February 18, 2026

Advance sign-up and online pre-work required

CONTACT

Meagan Salomon, brotherm@purdue.edu, 812-435-5287
Tonya Short, short43@purdue.edu, 812-882-3509

TO LEARN MORE AND REGISTER:

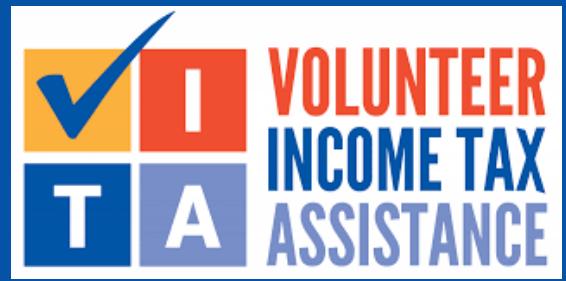
<https://cvent.me/3xZQvZ>

If you are in need of accommodations to attend this program, please contact Meagan Salomon at brotherm@purdue.edu or 812-435-5287 by February 18, 2026.

If you need an interpreter or translator, please contact Meagan Salomon at brotherm@purdue.edu or 812-435-5287 by February 18, 2026.

For special dietary needs, contact Meagan Salomon at brotherm@purdue.edu or 812-435-5287 by February 18, 2026.

GET YOUR TAXES DONE FOR **FREE**



If your household income was less than \$67,000 in 2025, you are eligible to file your tax return for free through United Way of Southwestern Indiana's VITA Program.

APPOINTMENTS REQUIRED

Make an appointment on our website:
unitedwayswi.org/vita-program

Or
Scan the QR Code



REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

- All income information (W-2, 1099, 1098)
- If married filing jointly - both spouses must be present
- Valid driver's license or government-issued ID
- Social Security numbers (or ITIN) for all persons on return
- Taxpayer IP-PIN (if applicable)
- IRS Healthcare form 1095-A (if applicable)

- Bank routing and account number (for direct deposit)
- Landlord name, address, and rent payment amount
- Child care provider name, address, and amount paid
- Real estate property tax receipt (if applicable)
- Documentation of overtime, last pay stub, or employer statement (if applicable)
- Documentation of tip income, last pay stub, or employer statement (if applicable)

***Missing or incomplete documentation may result in rescheduling of appointments or missed IRS credits.**
Please bring all required information with you when you come.



Questions regarding the VITA Program? Please call 812-421-7477.

Purdue Extension—Spencer County

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**Spencer County 4-H
Pork Chop Dinner & Auction
February 28th, 2026
at Spencer County YCC**