

Extension services offer free resources on a variety of topics

Becky Krystal *Washington Post*

Want cooking and conservation tips? Look no further than your university's extension service.

Formally established by an act of Congress in 1914, extension programs are based at land-grant colleges and universities and tasked with providing informal, research-based education to agricultural producers, business owners and the general public on a wide variety of topics, from parenting and gardening to cooking and food safety.

Julie Garden-Robinson, vice president for awards and recognition at the National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, says people in her line of work call themselves "the best-kept secret. We don't want to be a secret. We want people to access our resources."

That has continued to evolve especially since last year. "We had to really flex and change during the pandemic," says Garden-Robinson. Extension programs have risen to meet the needs of people more interested in gardening, preserving and cooking at home in the past 14 months. Much of that outreach has come in the form of social media posts and other online programs, including classes.

What extension services can do for you.

Serve as a reliable source

Anyone who has ever done an online search knows how much bad advice there is out there. When it comes to food, it may not just be bad, says Sue Mosbacher, a master food preserver program coordinator for the University of California Cooperative Extension, it could be unsafe. If you're doing an online search, Mosbacher recommends adding a ".edu" domain to your search terms to try to capture results from extension programs. Including the term "extension" is another good move. You can also find the extension program associated with the land-grant schools in your state and start exploring their offerings. Programs do their best to cater to the specific needs of their particular communities, which is why you might find lots of information related to fish and game in Alaska, for instance. Extension can also provide you direct access to experts or people who know experts. Agents can do one-on-one consultations when people have a question, Henley says. It's not uncommon for agents and coordinators to have a PhD and even if the person you talk to doesn't know the answer, they will reach out to faculty experts on their campus or agents from other programs to try to find it.

Provide affordable education

Most extension resources are free or low-cost. Those that do require a fee are often just to cover the cost of materials, such as for a canning class, Mosbacher says. One of my favorite extension offerings is the boring-sounding but infinitely practical fact sheet. Henley says part of her task is to try to find topic areas that haven't been covered so that she can produce fact sheets, which may be catered to her local audience. Can't find what you're looking for? Just ask.

Another avenue: podcasts, Food Safety

Talk, for example, is hosted by two scientists from FoodCoVNET, a consortium of experts from several universities formed in response to COVID-related questions about the food supply chain.

Your next volunteer opportunity

While many extension employees are university-based, "really, the volunteers are the boots on the ground doing the work, interacting with the public. They go through rigorous training," DiCaprio says. Volunteers on the local level (typically by county) are often the ones offering classes to the public or even, at least pre-pandemic, holding office hours and answering questions via email and phone.

Be a better, safer, healthier home cook
"We cover all areas of the food system from start to finish," as well as all skill levels, Mosbacher says. Want to know what to plant in your backyard or container garden? Consult a master gardener. When those plants go bananas and you need to know how to can, freeze or dehydrate all that produce — and then use what you preserve — extension has you covered. Extension is also heavily involved in food safety — before, during and after cooking. Henley, for example, conducted scientific research about the dangers of washing poultry and helped launch a "Don't Wash Your Chicken!" campaign to educate consumers. Consumers can find information on food issues related to preparing for and dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters that may result in power outages.

Some extension programs will conduct safety testing on food products from small businesses or legally required training for food handlers and managers. You can find resources related to nutrition and health, too. Garden-Robinson says extension efforts touch on heart health, diabetes prevention, cancer risk reduction and more. They span from children to seniors.