



# From the **Ground UP**



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## IAA Foundation secures \$120,000 usda grant for Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois teachers will experience agriculture firsthand and enhance student learning related to food, agri-science and STEM agriculture careers thanks to grant funding from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom Agricultural Academy: Integrating Agri Science program was recently awarded \$120,000 to conduct 100 multiple day trainings over the next four years. The IAA Foundation, which serves in a fundraising capacity for Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom (IAITC), successfully secured the grant on the program's behalf.

“Agricultural Academies are an impactful and creative way to provide agricultural literacy training, curriculum development and enhancement,” said Kevin Daugherty, education director for IAITC. “The goal is to provide K-8 teachers with the tools and skillsets necessary to enhance student learning in the areas of food and agricultural sciences.”

Topics introduced include technologies in consumer marketing, agriculture production, product processing food sciences, biotechnology, horticultural sciences, communications and marketing.

Twenty-five multiple day training sessions and field trips are conducted annually and attended by approximately 500 educators who leave with increased knowledge and confidence to teach subjects in food and agricultural sciences as well as STEM integration. Through career exploration, educators gain a clearer understanding of job opportunities available in food and agriculture sciences.

The IAITC program brings a proven and effective delivery model that gets objective and science-based agriculture content into the hands of teachers in every county throughout the state of Illinois. IAITC will continue to use this effective model to introduce lessons and enhance learning related to food, agri-science and STEM agriculture careers, helping increase agricultural literacy and career readiness.

“Each year we seek to fully fund a program of work for IAITC,” said IAA Foundation Director Susan Moore. “This means securing close to \$800,000 annually to ensure resources remain available at no cost to teachers and that county ag literacy programs can successfully reach more than 660,000 students each year. Training teachers to utilize these great educational resources in the classroom

allows even more students the opportunity to grow and learn through agriculture.”

This work is supported by the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative’s Professional Development for Agricultural Literacy Program [award no. 2020-67037-31053/project accession no. 1021672] from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

### Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI)

The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) is the nation’s leading competitive grants program for agricultural sciences. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) awards AFRI research, education, and extension grants to improve rural economies, increase food production, stimulate the bioeconomy, mitigate impacts of climate variability, address water availability issues, ensure food safety and security, enhance human nutrition and train the next generation of the agricultural workforce.

### AFRI Education and Workforce Development

The AFRI Education and

Workforce Development Program focuses on developing the next generation of research, education and extension professionals in the food and agricultural sciences. The program educates professionals to lead agriculture into the future by solving current and future challenges facing our society. The AFRI Education and Workforce Development Program (EWD) addresses projected shortfalls of qualified graduates in the agricultural, food, and renewable natural resources sectors of the U.S. economy.

### The IAA Foundation

As the charitable arm of the Illinois Farm Bureau, the IAA Foundation’s mission is to support the future of agriculture and Illinois farm families through education and research. Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom is the top funding priority of the Foundation.

### Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom

The Mission of Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom (IAITC) is to teach Illinois children agriculture’s importance and the vital role it plays in their lives and society. IAITC supports local educational and outreach efforts by providing high quality, standards based, scientifically sound agriculture information that can be easily integrated by teachers into the existing classroom curriculum. Each year IAITC reaches more than 660,000 students and 37,000 teachers throughout Illinois. Services and materials are provided at no cost to teachers.

## Area graduates receive 4-H scholarships

4-H is the youth education program of University of Illinois Extension. Through 4-H there are several local scholarships available.

These scholarships go to current Fulton County 4-H members who actively participate in 4-H events, and who have shown great accomplishments through 4-H. This year Fulton County 4-H presented scholarships to six graduates from four area schools.

Three scholarships were awarded from funds donated in memory of Hilda Rock, a long-time 4-H leader from the Cuba area, by her family. Kyle Spangler received a \$900 scholarship from these funds. Jaclyn Janssen and Tom Janssen each received \$800.

Jaclyn also received the Roberta Mahr Memorial Scholarship of \$100. Roberta Mahr was a former leader of the Farmington Lucky Clovers 4-H Club, and the club continues to fund the scholarship in her memory.

New this year, the \$500 Phillips 4-H Scholarship was presented to Halee Hendel. This scholarship is sponsored by Roger and Cathy Phillips, who wanted to help a deserving 4-H member further his or her education.

Halee also received the Merle L. Jenkins Memorial Agricultural Scholarship of \$150. Merle L. Jenkins, a 1939 graduate of the University of Illinois (B.S. Agriculture), was a long-time supporter of agriculture, youth, and education in Fulton County, including service on the Fulton County

Fair Board and Lewistown School Board, agriculture teacher, and a life-long farmer in Fulton County. As an on-going tribute to Mr. Jenkins, family and friends established The Merle L. Jenkins Memorial Agricultural Scholarship to honor him for his great love of agriculture and education throughout his life.

The \$500 Gary Eathington Memorial Scholarship was presented to Emma Eathington. Gary was a 40-year 4-H leader who passed away in the fall of 2012. Gary raised cattle and was a big supporter of 4-H and the University of Illinois.

Amy Shaeffer received the Virginia Barnard Memorial Scholarship. Virginia was a Fulton County 4-H Leader for 69 years, who passed away in 2017. This \$500 scholarship goes to a 4-H member pursuing a college education in Agriculture or Home Economics, and who is beginning studies at Spoon River College.

Kyle Spangler is a 10-year member of the Checkrow Volunteers 4-H Club, and a 2020 graduate of Oakwood Academy. Kyle will attend Moody Bible Institute in the fall, to pursue a degree in Worship and Media Arts. He plans to become a worship pastor.

Jaclyn Janssen is a nine-year member of the Avondale 4-H Club, and a 2020 graduate of Abingdon-Avon High School. Jaclyn will attend Illinois Central College, majoring in Culinary Arts Management. She plans to work in a bakery or restaurant, and some

Continued on pg. 2



United States Department of Agriculture  
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## A Message from FCFB President.....

You’re essential! We’ve always known the importance that agriculture plays in the success of our rural communities and in our entire Country. During these difficult times we’re living through, now everyone is well aware of that.

And you’re essential to the future of this organization, too. We need your continued support of Fulton County and Illinois Farm Bureau (IFB) by renewing your dues if you have

not already done so. IFB leadership and staff have worked tirelessly the past couple of months to ensure protections for our farmers, agriculture businesses, and our rural economies. IFB played a huge role in crafting and lobbying for the \$2 trillion CARES Act enacted in late March, and then the follow up provisions in May. We’ve worked to ensure assistance to small businesses, food pantries, and education resources. We continue to work to make sure your sup-

ply chain, transportation, and marketing structures are protected.

I hope that you will take a few minutes to send in your \$75 dues today and help us continue the work we are doing on behalf of our ag industry and rural communities. Please mail it to 15411 N IL 100 HWY, Lewistown, IL 61542 or call our office at 309-547-3011 to pay by debit or credit. Thank you for your continued support,

Barry Fisher, President

# Adapting robots to fight COVID-19



Girish Chowdhary and colleagues at the University of Illinois developed the TerraSentia robot and are adapting it to pick fruit and disinfect surfaces. (Courtesy Photo)

Making a robot that can perform tasks in the field or in the hospital

TURBANA, Ill. — Where coronavirus puts human workers at risk, robots can step in to do the job. Girish Chowdhary and his research team at the University of Illinois already have developed the robot, and they are now adapting it to current needs.

TerraSentia is a small, semi-autonomous robot that moves nimbly on the ground. A team of these robots work together, combining the speed and power of technology with the attention to detail of human labor.

“We made a good robotic platform. It has wheels, but it didn’t have any arms; it was just moving around,” says Chowdhary, assistant professor of agricultural and biological engineering in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) and The Grainger College of Engineering at U of I.

So Chowdhary strengthened his collaboration with Kris Hauser and Girish Krishnan, both professors in Grainger Engineer-

ing.

“Essentially, with the COVID-19 crisis, two things happened. One is the urgent need to keep healthcare workers safe from sick patients,” Chowdhary says. “The second, medium-term need is enabling more diversity in our food systems to accommodate social distancing and disrupted food chains. In some places, fruit is rotting on farms because they’re not able to get people to do the work. And Illinois, while being a top agricultural state, still has very limited fruit and vegetable growing capacity”

Chowdhary’s team accelerated the work to make a robot that can perform tasks in the field or in the hospital, keeping people out of harm’s way and filling labor gaps. They partnered with Krishnan, assistant professor in industrial and enterprise systems engineering and a leading expert on soft robotic arms and manipulators, to design a hybrid soft arm for field robots. Together, the team plans to test a prototype on picking cherry tomatoes and blueberries this summer at the Center for Digital Agriculture’s autonomous farm, and they expect to have the robots ready for farm work next year.

“That’s an aggressive plan,” Chowdhary says. “But we need to move fast.”

Chowdhary and his collaborators also saw a clear need in the healthcare industry.

“Healthcare professionals who work with COVID-19 patients have a higher risk of being exposed to infection. Those individuals are our first line of defense. If they start getting sick, it’s difficult,” he says.

One way to limit exposure to the coronavirus is to disinfect rooms and surfaces. Robots already exist that can disinfect a room by filling it with UV light for 20 minutes. But the light is harmful to human skin, so people have to leave while the robot works.

Chowdhary teamed up with Hauser, associate professor in the Department of Computer Science and the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at U of I, to develop technologies that use UV lights, wiping, or other mechanisms for disinfection. Hauser is a renowned expert in health-

care robotics and was already working on wiping and disinfection robots.

The researchers partnered with EarthSense, a start-up company in U of I Research Park that Chowdhary co-founded, to manufacture the robots and scale up the technology for production.

“The technology that works is the one that scales. It doesn’t have to be optimal or perfect,” Chowdhary says. “Sometimes we forget this as scientists; we focus on the perfect solution. Because of the urgent need, we now have to focus on scaling up.”

Chowdhary’s group will work on localization and mapping technology for enabling the robots to work close to humans as they move around in a hospital environment. A cloud-based system will make the robots traceable, showing which areas have been disinfected.

“At Carle Health we welcome advancements like this that help us stay firmly focused on caring for our patients while keeping healthcare providers and our environmental services staff safe,” says Lynne Barnes, Carle senior vice president of facilities. “Times like this, especially, require openness to new ideas, and this idea certainly would have helpful

applications in a healthcare setting.”

The robots are not limited to hospitals; they could work at schools, universities, offices, restaurants, airports, or any high-traffic places that need constant disinfection.

Chowdhary always envisioned that TerraSentia would move beyond agricultural applications, perhaps five or six years in the future. But with the COVID-19 crisis, he and his colleagues felt compelled to bring the technology forward as quickly as possible.

“COVID-19 isn’t looking like it’s going to disappear any time soon, and there will be other diseases in the future, so the need for these robots will continue,” he points out.

Expanding TerraSentia applications is possible because of cross-campus collaborations among U of I experts from ACES, Grainger, and the Carle Illinois College of Medicine, Chowdhary notes.

“We are able to do this work because this great institution brings all these different experts together so we can team up and safely step out of our comfort zone,” he concludes.

The United States Department of Agriculture and the National Science Foundation funded the research.

— University of Illinois ACES.

day to own a bakery or restaurant.

Thomas Janssen is a nine-year member of the Avondale 4-H Club, and a 2020 graduate of Abingdon-Avon High School. Tom plans to attend Bradley University in the fall, majoring in Computer Science, with career plans to become a software developer or project manager in the technology field.

Halee Hendel is a 10-year member of the Avondale 4-H Club, and a 2020 graduate of Abingdon-Avon High School. Halee will attend Illinois Wesleyan University this fall, double majoring in Psychology and Music. Her career plans are to be a Music Therapist/Clinical Psychologist working with young people who are diagnosed with cancer or terminal illness.

Emma Eathington is a 10-year member of the Fairview Huskies 4-H Club, and a

2020 graduate of Spoon River Valley High School. Emma will attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the fall, majoring in Animal Science. She would like to work in the field of Animal Nutrition and Research.

Amy Shaeffer is a 9-year member of the Busy Bees 4-H Club, and a 2020 graduate of Lewistown Community High School. Amy plans to attend Spoon River College, majoring in Animal Science. Amy plans to become a Veterinary Assistant.

These 4-H members are to be commended for their hard work and dedication to 4-H over the years.

For more information on the Fulton County 4-H Program and its vast array of activities, call 547-3711 or email jblout@illinois.edu.

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## FROM THE GROUND UP

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# Hydroponic lettuce production at WIU



Collaborative agriculture research at Western Illinois University, with a boost from a recently awarded federal grant, means opportunities for faculty and students to study hydroponic lettuce production. Here, WIU faculty members Shelby Henning and Dan Atherton observe the lettuce growing hydroponically in Knoblauch Hall. (Courtesy Photo)

Lettuce planted April 13 was ready for harvest in mid-May

MACOMB, Ill. – Collaborative agriculture research at Western Illinois University, with a boost from a recently awarded federal grant, means opportunities for faculty and students to study hydroponic lettuce production, with the aid of hyperspectral reflectance technology, in future semesters.

WIU Agriculture Assistant Professors Shelby Henning and Dan Atherton began collaborating two years ago, when Henning and his horticulture students, along with technical assistance from Atherton, built a small hydroponic lettuce production system in the Ag Mech Shop in Knoblauch Hall's

basement. The system was constructed of inexpensive materials, the bulk of which was PVC pipe, silicone caulk and recycled lumber. A single horticultural LED lamp served as the only light source for the lettuce grown in the student-made system.

"Basically, we wanted to see if our simple system using the PVC pipe would work," said Henning. "It worked extraordinarily well, which flew in the face of what I thought would happen."

The two professors quickly learned the expertise each possesses melded together naturally into the indoor lettuce production project – Henning contributing (soft science) vegetable production expertise and Atherton with (hard science) computer science and precision agriculture components.

Henning and Atherton have since been refining the production of 'Rex' butterhead lettuce using two prototype lettuce production systems that use rectangular, commercial-grade hydroponic channels in lieu of round PVC pipe, and multiple LED lighting units, to provide sufficient light for all of the growing plants. Atherton and students in his shop skills class constructed the second prototype system, using the first system Atherton had created as a model.

Henning and Atherton are now attempting to improve nutrient recommendations for hydroponic lettuce in order to save producers both time and input costs.

"The nutrient solution within the system is replaced at set dates to determine the optimal time frame for replacement," Atherton said. "Some advantages of the lettuce grown in this hydroponic system are that no pesticides are used, the timeframe from planting to harvest is greatly accelerated and the shelf-life of the crop far surpasses that of lettuce grown in the field."

The latest lettuce was planted April 13 and was ready for harvest in mid-May.

Atherton compares the taste of the basement-produced lettuce to the difference in screen quality between a 4K television and a traditional set.

"It's tastier," said Atherton. "And, it doesn't get any closer to the farm than picking it and putting it straight to a plate, which is something you certainly can do with lettuce produced this way."

From about three weeks after seeding to harvest, the growing channels housing the lettuce are disconnected from the system and placed in a custom-made stand to flood the lettuce plants with light. For each lettuce plant, a hyperspectral spectrometer is used to repeatedly capture spectral reflectance signatures (curves) for each plant.

The curves display the reflectance percentages from roughly 350 – 1000 nm, which includes both visible and near-infrared wavelength regions. The curves are then analyzed using advanced software algorithms. The end result is the early detection of nutrient deficiencies in the lettuce crop far before they become visible to the human eye.

The awarded grant, about \$26,000 from the United States Department of Agriculture and awarded by the Illinois Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Grant Program, will facilitate construction of a new system double the size of the existing prototypes. The new system will be located on the first floor of Knoblauch Hall and will include many refinements to the lettuce production and data acquisition process. Also, additional lighting technologies will be evaluated for lettuce production in the new system.

"A commercial grower's operation would be many times larger than our experimental system, so any refinements in water and fertilizer utilization resulting from this research would be significant," said Atherton. "Our project will help us better understand the relationship between the timing of nutrient solution replacement and lettuce quality."

Early in the Spring 2020 semester, some of the harvested lettuce was provided to the Knoblauch Cafe, which gives WIU's recreation, park and tourism administration (RPTA) students hands-on experience running a foodservice facility.

WIU School of Agriculture Director Andy Baker said this project also provides a great opportunity to begin growing food for students on campus.

"This system has the potential of growing 400 heads of lettuce per month," he said. "It also has the potential of assisting with WIU's food pantry, if there is a surplus of produce. I appreciate both Dr. Atherton and Dr. Henning for their efforts in their awarded grant to provide a unique learning opportunity for our students and the potential of providing fresh, local produce for our food services on campus."

Both professors plan to use the production processes in their fall classes.

In addition to the lettuce research, Henning is also working with WIU Chemistry Assistant Professor Mette Soendergaard and University students to study the cancer-prevention qualities of heirloom tomatoes, which he grows hydroponically in the School of Agriculture's greenhouse facilities.

For more information on the WIU School of Agriculture, visit [wiu.edu/ag](http://wiu.edu/ag).

## Red Cross blood drive July 27

The Fulton County Farm Bureau will host a blood drive with the American Red Cross on Monday, July 27 from 1-6pm. We will be operating our donation drive using some extra precautions. The guidelines that we are following to help keep donors safe, in addition to enhanced cleaning and social distancing as much as possible, are:

1. We are asking that all donors schedule an appointment online. This can be done through our office at 547-3011, by calling 1-800-RED-CROSS or at [redcrossblood.org](http://redcrossblood.org). We will only be able to accept walk-ins where there is an opening in the schedule or there is a 'no-show' appointment. This allows us to practice social distancing as much as possible and avoid a surge of donors at any time during the blood drive. For the BEST experience, PLEASE MAKE AN APPOINTMENT.

2. We are asking all donors to wear masks while at the drive. One will be provided for any donor that does not have one. If you are unwilling to wear a mask, we ask that you please postpone your donation.

3. We will be taking temperatures of donors and volunteers as soon as they walk in the door. Any donor above 99.5 will be asked to come back another time when they do not have a fever.

4. We are asking that no one additional, aside from donors and volunteers are

present at the blood drive - ie, no children or others not donating.

5. We will only be allowed to serve prepackaged snacks as refreshments, so NO Farm Bureau-women baked goods or sandwiches for this drive!

6. In addition to these precautions, Red Cross will also be testing blood donations for COVID-19 antibodies. The antibody test is authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and will indicate if the donor's immune system has produced antibodies to the coronavirus, regardless of whether they developed symptoms.

If you are interested in this testing, this is a perfect opportunity to have it done. You just have to be willing to give us a pint of your blood! We encourage you to utilize RapidPass® for a speedier donation!

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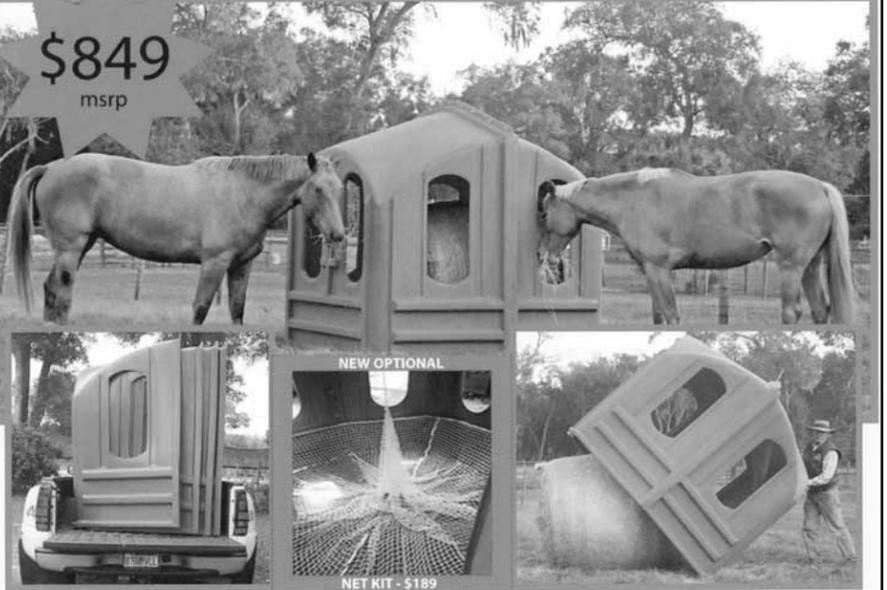
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## Illinois river closure

As a reminder the Illinois River will be closing to navigation for the repair of 5 lock systems July 1, 2020. This has been a 3 year preparation process to perform overdue maintenance on these lock systems. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has indicated that all signs point to the projects being on schedule and completed

by October 29, 2020. USACE has launched a website to outline the repair process and timeline.

As part of Illinois Farm Bureau's efforts to prepare members for the consolidated closures, an informational page has been created on the transportation resources section of the ILFB website.



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