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DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
RESEARCH & EXTENSION

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Local Farm Produce Safe to Buy, Safe to Eat

Strawberry season has arrived and with it a whole new way of purchasing farm goods. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, farmers are finding ways to deliver their goods while minimizing contact between customers.

Many roadside farm stands are offering drive-thrus, where customers can purchase fresh produce without leaving their vehicles. Other stands offer pre-order and delivery options, and some are packaging the produce in advance to minimize handling.

Barnhill Orchards in Lonoke, for example, shifted its operation from a farm stand to a drive-through. Customers can either order online and pick up curbside, or they can order on-site from a menu of produce offerings. With a quick pop of the trunk, produce is loaded into buyers' vehicles.

On March 26, the state Secretary of Health issued a directive prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 people in any confined indoor or outdoor space. Outdoor food markets are exempt because they are considered critical in ensuring Arkansans have access to healthy food options. At this time, farmers markets can sell food products and limited personal hygiene items like soap and handmade masks, but other crafts or goods are not to be sold. Cooking demonstrations, crafts, entertainment — and other activities that draw crowds — have been put on hold.

While many Arkansans are willing to wait a little longer in line for a flat of fresh strawberries, a few buyers have worried about food safety.

"I have had calls from people who want to know if it's safe



SAFE TO BUY, SAFE TO EAT — Outdoor food markets are exempt from the Arkansas Department of Health's March 26 directive prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 people, because they are considered critical in ensuring Arkansans have access to healthy food options. At this time, farmers markets can sell food products and limited personal hygiene items like soap and handmade masks, but other crafts or goods are not to be sold.

to buy locally grown food or fresh-picked produce - or any produce - that is handpicked," said White County Extension Agent Sherri Sanders.

The answer, in short: yes.

"Locally grown produce is a benefit since it doesn't have to go through so many handlers to get to the end-user," Sanders said. "Our farmers already follow strict food safety requirements, long before COVID."

Strawberries are one of the more labor-intensive crops because they must be handpicked and hand-packed.

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“Based on what we know about how the virus is spread, consumers should understand that it is unlikely that you would contract COVID-19 by eating produce that has been touched by someone,” said Dr. Amanda Philyaw Perez, assistant professor and food systems and safety specialist.

Coronaviruses are generally thought to be spread from person to person through respiratory droplets. Currently, there is no evidence to support the transmission of COVID-19 associated with food, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

However, it is now known that the virus can survive on a surface for two to three days, and the surface type can affect the time of survival. It is important to follow good hygiene practices, such as washing your hands after handling food products, and double efforts to clean and sanitize surfaces that have come into contact with food packaging.

All fruits and vegetables should be washed with cool water. Additionally, cooking produce eliminates the need for worry

as well, though half of fresh strawberries and blackberries are eaten raw.

Some guidelines for when you visit farmers markets and roadside stands:

- Stay at least 6 feet away from others.
- Ask your local producer about pre-order and delivery options to minimize time out in public.
- Avoid touching your face until you are able to wash your hands.
- Clean and sanitize surfaces that come into contact with food packaging.

To learn more about produce safety, contact your local Cooperative Extension Service agent or visit www.uaex.edu. For COVID-19 resources, visit uaex.edu/COVID19. For local food resources, visit uaex.edu/localfoods. 

Benton County 4-Her Scores Legislative Kudos from Governor

Gov. Asa Hutchinson appeared at his May 1 news briefing wearing a face mask made especially for him by Benton County 4-Her Faith Fritch.

The green and blue mask, which featured 4-H clovers, was embroidered with “Asa” and delivered April 29 to the governor’s security detail at the Governor’s Mansion.

Hutchinson conducts daily COVID-19 briefings which are broadcast via YouTube and watched by media as well as thousands of Arkansans. He had this to say:

“First, I want to recognize this 4-H mask, that I’m delighted with. I think it’s the first monogrammed mask that I’ve had. And this is made by Faith Fritch of Hiwasse, Arkansas. She’s a 4-H member and the teams have made more than 30,000 face masks that have been made and donated by volunteer groups affiliated with the Cooperative Extension Service. From Extension Homemakers, to Master Gardeners to Extension Get Fit and 4-H Clubs. So thank you, Faith, for the excellent mask that I will wear, and as a former 4-H member, I’m very, very proud of that.” 



The mask made by Benton County 4-Her, Faith F. made its news conference debut at Gov. Asa Hutchinson’s May 1 news briefing.

To Our Extension Retirees

Welcome to May and the continuation of the pandemic into its third month. Things have settled down some, and the Division is gradually re-opening facilities over the next few weeks across the state within a Stage 1 plan. While we have never closed down, we need to get back into our facilities sooner or later, but at the same time not take unnecessary risks. We hope that all of you are staying safe and healthy.

Please note the article on local foods and produce. The pandemic has certainly shined the spotlight on our supply chain system, including food production and distribution. While we did pretty well for the most part, the pandemic and people's behavior early on demonstrated some weaknesses that all of us can work together to fix. One thing we can do is support our local food producers and distributors, including farmer's markets. There is nothing better than the first local strawberry in the spring. We certainly appreciate Amanda Perez and staff for leading in this area for the state.

I hope you noticed the governor talking about the 4-H mask he received from Faith Fritch the other day. Faith is one of our great 4-H youth leaders, and her family has been very active over the years. People who talk negatively about "this younger generation" have certainly never met Faith or Lane Fritch. There are no better people of any age that I know of. These youth are an example of the power of the 4-H program, a program that can truly "transform" lives.

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Eagle-eyed Homeowners on Lookout for Honeybee-killing Asian Giant Hornets

Extension agents have been getting calls from Arkansan homeowners who think they've seen Asian giant "murder hornets" after seeing numerous media reports about the invasive species in the United States.

The hornets were found in Washington state in late 2019, but are not in Arkansas at this time.

"We have had numerous panicked reports from across the state from homeowners," said Jon Zawislak, extension entomologist and apiary expert for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, "but what we are likely seeing right now are *Vespa crabro* queens, a type of European hornet."

The markings for the European and the Asian hornets are distinct. The Asian hornet, or *Vespa mandarinia*, grows up to two inches long, has a large orange or yellow head with prominent eyes, and a black and yellow-orange striped

abdomen. They form large colonies that nest in the ground, according to the Washington Department of Agriculture.

The European hornet is more yellow with irregular waxy stripes.

While the European hornets are already in Arkansas, they are less predatory and destructive than the Asian hornets.

The "murder" hornets' ominous nickname refers to their practice of viciously attacking honeybees, tearing off their heads and taking the carcasses back to their nests to feed their young. Just a few Asian giant hornets can destroy a honeybee colony in a few hours.

"That's bad news for a struggling industry that continues to reel from average colony losses of 30 percent or worse every year for over a decade," Zawislak said.



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June Birthdays

Sharon Dawson - June 1	Martha May - June 11
Linda Outlaw - June 1	Tamara Walkingstick - June 13
Ford Baldwin - June 1	Michael Hamilton - June 14
Mae Rosby - June 1	Janet Kuykendall - June 16
Robin Bridges - June 2	Lila Grist - June 20
Linda Hon - June 3	Bonnie Taylor - June 20
Jesse Clark - June 4	Rin Robertson - June 20
Mike McCarter - June 5	Dennis Bailey - June 21
Jelyne Hubbard Coldwell - June 6	Sherry Black - June 23
Brenda Vick - June 7	Clifford Coker - June 24
Vetress Strong - June 8	Carroll Garner - June 25
Lanny Ashlock - June 8	Romona Thieme - June 25
Rex Roberg - June 9	Sharon High - June 27
Jo Howard - June 10	Pamela Ferrill - June 27
Graffie Eldridge - June 11	Dorothy Hall - June 29

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Giant Hornets, cont.

Honey is a sought-after specialty crop in Arkansas. Arkansas beekeepers maintained about 28,000 colonies and harvested 1.4 million pounds of honey in 2018, the latest year for which U.S. Department of Agriculture data are available.

The *Vespa mandarinia* is native to Asia and found as far north as eastern Russia, down to southeast Asia and into India and Japan. They prefer to live in low mountain areas and forest habitats, while almost completely avoiding open plains and high-altitude climates.

“This is good news since there are many high mountains and a very vast plain separating Arkansas from Washington state,” Zawislak said. “These should stand as great barriers to the natural migration of these introduced hornets.

“Of course, the Pacific Ocean should have been a pretty good barrier too,” he continued. “But as the usual suspect, people are responsible for the movement of many species, which can often become invasive pests in new lands. It may only be a matter of time before they discover the beauty of the Natural State.” 

To Our Extension Retirees, cont.

We also appreciate Jon Zawislak for bringing science to the forefront in talking about the “murder hornet” panic in the Pacific Northwest where a couple of these insects were recently discovered. The reaction of the media and some people contributed to my resolve to write the book “The Death of Common Sense” someday, but Jon and others calmly talked the science and helped highlight the facts of the situation. What a job we have today.

As we get back to the “new normal” over the coming weeks and months, I hope that all of you are having the time of your lives and enjoying good health and prosperity in spite of what the 24-hour “news” cycle is saying. Let us know if we can help and have a great May and June. 

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