The Bitterroot Valley is a destination point for outdoor recreation and retirees. Nestled between two mountain ranges with a blue ribbon fishing river, the county offers diverse opportunities in hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and skiing. Often referred to as the banana belt of Montana due to climate, the county attracts many individuals who call Ravalli County their home. Agriculture, natural resources, recreation and tourism, construction, and small businesses are all important sectors of the local economy. While the Bitterroot Valley is close in proximity to Missoula, it defines itself through its rural character, small town communities, and open spaces.

Ravalli County citizens directly benefit through the programs and opportunities fundamentally important to the mission of Montana State University Extension in Ravalli County. Financial support of Extension is achieved through tri-funded support and the partnership of Ravalli County Government, Montana legislators, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and through partnerships and/or grant funding. Citizens trust the information provided through the office is accurate and dependable. This trust is built upon relationships developed over the years with Extension professionals and office staff.

The office is comprised of four staff members educating the public in the areas of 4-H Youth Development, Agriculture, Horticulture, Family Finances, Food Safety and Nutrition Education, and Natural Resources. Visit the MSU Extension office in Ravalli County or connect online with Facebook.

Photo by Patrick Mangan
Growing 4-H in Ravalli County

4-H Youth Development

Montana’s 4-H Youth Development program in Ravalli County offers experiences for youth to learn, discover and engage, with an emphasis on teaching life skills, responsibility and the value of citizenship. In the 2016-2017 4-H year, the Extension office served over 480 youth in 22 community clubs through the assistance of 160 registered volunteer leaders. Every year, nearly 2000 youth are reached through school enrichment and afterschool programming opportunities. Experiential learning occurs throughout the year with their enrolled projects, ranging from photography to livestock, as well as at county-wide opportunities such as annual junior and teen camping programs.

Youth have the opportunity to build skills and knowledge in the project of their choice. Many youth engage in the 4-H program through club work as a member and complete a project. Often, these youth take an exhibit to the fair to be judged by experts and receive feedback to improve their efforts for the upcoming year. Through their engagement in a 4-H club, youth learn life skills to help them be successful, contributing members of society now and in the future.

Throughout the year, volunteer leaders coordinate learning opportunities to bring members together and focus on a learning experience. Some of these opportunities are created in partnership with teen leaders to help them build experience in leading meetings, answering questions and reflecting on the event to make the next event better. In recent years, we have had the pleasure of graduating 4-H members from high school and gaining them as 4-H leaders who have the opportunity to give back to the program that benefited them.

One leader who was in 4-H as a high schooler started volunteering right out of high school. She decided to lead the county-wide 4-H photography meetings. After a few months, she expressed, “this time in 4-H has really opened my eyes to the fact that I would love to pursue my teacher’s certificate and go into education.”

There are countless ways where youth and community members can be enriched with the 4-H program. Talk to a 4-H member or leader in your community to learn their personal stories of why they contribute to largest out-of-school youth organization in the nation.

Photos by Katelyn Andersen
4-H Transforms Lives

The 4-H program transforms the lives of people across generations and across the United States as the youth development organization of Cooperative Extension. One 4-H leader, Holly Shupert, shares her story as a 4-H member in Oklahoma and now as a 4-H parent in Montana:

“Being in 4-H was a given, my mother had been in 4-H. I attended my local 4-H club and learned valuable skills. I learned to appreciate all the skills and I knew I wanted my children to be in 4-H.

“Montana 4-H clubs had the same solid youth development structure I grew up with. My daughter, Courtney, was a beginning 4-H member when we arrived in Montana. Courtney loved making friends, but was shy. She took on numerous 4-H projects, which required illustrated talks and demonstrations. With each demonstration Courtney’s confidence grew. She quietly watched a county-wide teen leadership project, observing the teens having fun, learning leadership skills, and helping younger 4-H clubbers. When she turned 14, she joined 4-H Teen Council. This was when her leadership journey began in earnest.

“At 15, Courtney applied to be a County 4-H Teen Ambassador. She entered her first Ambassador interview with prominent community members barely able to remember her name. After the interview, the county Extension agent helped her work on her interviewing skills and her confidence. Courtney continued in the leadership project and competed at the county Speech and Demo day with knees shaking, allowing her to progress and win at state before winning a trip to Nationals for her public speaking abilities. Courtney was learning that the more she prepared and the more she spoke, it got less intimidating.

“Courtney received a leadership scholarship from the University of Oklahoma, moving miles from Montana and 4-H for college. But the 4-H skills of meeting people, speaking, interviewing, and record-keeping went with her and provided a foundation from which she could build. In 2017, she served as a convocation speaker for her College at the University, in front of thousands of fellow graduates and guests. She spoke with courage and conviction, having had years of practice through 4-H.

“4-H showed Courtney her capacity to grow and develop skills like public speaking. 4-H expanded and inspired Courtney to reach for more opportunities to learn and lead. 4-H is developing tomorrow’s leaders by equipping them with the skills and experiences to face tomorrow. While the young Courtney I remember would never have imagined speaking in front of thousands of people, you never know what dreams 4-H will help you achieve!”

Courtney’s experience has impacted her youth and adult life. Follow Ravalli County 4-H on Facebook or visit the Ravalli County MSU Extension office website to learn about events, workshops and ways to join or volunteer with the program.
Family and Consumer Programming in Custer County

Hamilton Walking Map Inspires Health with Walk & Win 2017

Personal health and well-being is an important facet of living an enjoyable life. Research shows that physical activity is a primary prevention tool used to increase physical activity and improve overall health. Walking is a simple and inexpensive way for adults to engage in physical activity and have a positive impact on their life.

In fall 2016, the MSU Extension – Ravalli County office partnered with MSU College of Nursing students enrolled in the Population Based Nursing Care in the Community course. As a part of the class, the Family and Consumer Science Extension agent works with college nursing students to complete a community outreach project. The students chose to create a walking map to provide a resource to encourage physical activity in the City of Hamilton. This partnership has continued through the spring and fall semesters in 2017 with new nursing students and expanding the project with incentives and development of community maps.

The Hamilton Walking Map was released in December 2016, which inspired the nursing students to create an incentive program for the upcoming spring. During the months of May and June, community members chose routes on the Hamilton Walking Map to explore. Every route they walked resulted in an entry into a prize drawing. In two short months, 92 participants logged over 490 routes, totaling more than 1,330 miles collectively. Participants reported the following impacts:

- 70% reported improved mental health
- 69% reported increased physical activity
- 41% reported maintained current weight
- 34% reported improved stamina for everyday activities, such as climbing stairs
- 14% reported losing weight

One of the participants expressed a change in behavior from the Walk and Win 2017 program:

“My walking has turned into running and I’ve done two 5K’s since this walking program started. How fun to have the confidence to be more ambitious about my fitness goals, and I owe it to the structure you’ve set up. So thank you!

Photo by Michelle McConnaha
“Next stop? I’ll be swimming and running in the Bitterroot Classic Triathlon, and have a cyclist who will do the middle leg of the event.”

The Stevensville Walking Map will be released in early 2018 and plans are underway for a Walk & Win 2018. Tools, such as the Hamilton Walking Map and the Stevensville Walking Map, are designed to help local constituents engage in daily physical activity and improve their overall health.

**SNAP-Ed in Ravalli County**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed) offers free cooking and nutrition classes to SNAP eligible adults and elementary students in first, third and fifth grades.

As a statewide effort to offer nutrition education and build applicable cooking skills, the Nutrition Instructor, Rachel Ariaz, offered a new class curriculum called Create. It is designed to teach knife skills and help participants create a healthy meal based on the food they have on hand. For example, a participant can create a skillet with bell peppers, onions, broccoli and chicken to incorporate vegetables with their dinner entrée.

Starting in June, 51 adults participated in one of the 10 Create classes offered. Classes were held at the farmer’s market, which included all fresh and local produce from farmers in the Bitterroot Valley. Also, classes were held at the Trapper Peak Job Corp, HeadStart and a few classes were offered in Spanish.

For the 2016-2017 school year, 405 students were reached through 21 classrooms. A school’s eligibility is based on participation in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. In Ravalli County, qualifying schools for the nutrition classes include Darby, Hamilton, Stevensville and Victor.

Since June, 18 families completed the Eating Smart Being Active Program, a nine-week nutrition class series, offered to adults using one or more Public Assistance Programs.

This past fall, Clay Works selected the Ravalli County SNAP-Ed program be the beneficiary of their fundraiser, Empty Bowls. This effort encouraged local artists to create clay bowls, then served a simple meal at the fundraiser and participants received a bowl as part of the event. The funds from the event will support purchasing incentives for adults who complete the nine-week nutrition class offered through the Extension office. The fundraiser also brought community awareness to the availability of free nutrition education to qualified audiences.

The Ravalli County SNAP-Ed program is looking forward to continuing the community support and outreach into 2018 by providing free nutrition education to income-eligible adults, as well as first, third and fifth grade students in Ravalli County’s Title 1 schools.

*Photo by Katelyn Andersen*
Ravalli County Agricultural and Natural Resources Program Update

Most notable this year was a class series designed for owners of small farms and plots of land in the Bitterroot Valley. The nine-week class included 20 hours of instruction, field trips to a small farm and to the western Agriculture Research Center, and the opportunity to develop a plan of action and set goals to realize the desires and potential of each unique plot of land.

The workshop series included lessons and experiences with soils, plant communities, weeds, high value crops, wildlife, goal planning, and the development of a plan of action to accomplish the goals. The class culminated with each landowner presenting their goals for the future, based on knowledge learned during the class. One of the participants, Dianne, had this to say about the series and process:

“We purchased this property in February 2010. It had the one thing Doug had been dreaming of since 1983, a 30x50 foot shop. It came with five acres and a so-so road into the property. Gently sloping, covered in snow, peace and quiet, the most amazing views of the Bitterroot valley and west side mountains. We fell in love…”

“Taking this class was the best thing I could have possibly done to clarify where we go from here. Over the years we have had these nebulous thoughts and dreams about the property. We realized early on (after the snow had melted the first year) that we had a serious noxious weed problem… I realized I didn’t know much about my little eastside property.”

Several other programming efforts happened in 2017. Through collaboration with the Ravalli County Weed District, the Extension program coordinated and presented a day-long workshop on weed identification, management strategies, and plant community renovation, which was well-attended with 27 participants. Extension agents and volunteers engaged over 180 sixth graders with lessons on soil science during two day-long field experiences coordinated by the Bitterroot Conservation District. Additional presentations and field trips provided to the local high school agricultural education classes discussed attributes for successful leaders, and led class tours to the Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis. Eighty-six site visits were completed during the growing season, going to farms, ranches, gardens, and yards. Site visits provide the opportunity for one-on-one help for land owners, assisting with investigation of the site conditions, discussions of plans and challenges, and to offer information and advice toward reaching the desired goals.
Ravalli County Horticulture Update

Extension in Ravalli County developed multiple opportunities to engage the local community in horticulture programming and education in 2017. A course offering for Master Gardener Level 1 in the fall of 2017 had 27 active participants who completed the 16-hour training session. As a result of the Master Gardener class, participants stated, “I will be more vigilant about how I treat my soil.” Additionally, one participant’s plans include, “I have not gardened vegetables in the past and intend to do so. I’ll prune my fruit trees. And I will approach gardening with a broader, more encompassing view.” Favorite parts of the Master Gardener Level 1 class included a field trip to a local nursery, a hands-on soil science lesson, and a guest presentation by MSU Extension’s horticulturist, Toby Day. Participants were engaged with the materials, and left each class with a lot of information to apply to their own yards and gardens.

The Bitterroot Master Gardeners served local communities in many ways through the spring and summer. A spring effort included a landscaping and beautification project at the side entrance to the county administrative offices. In the first phase of the project, the master gardeners renovated a garden bed to include perennial flowers and shrubs, served by a new drip irrigation system. Future plans include a demonstration kitchen herb and vegetable garden beside the county offices. Master Gardeners occupy a booth at the Hamilton Community Farmers Market on Saturdays throughout the summer. This year, more than 56 volunteer hours were logged at the markets, answering questions and challenges in community members’ gardens.

The master gardeners took on a new program this fall, called a Guerilla Gardening effort. Through a partnership with our county-wide Council on Aging, several community members who could use help and support with a fall yard cleanup were identified. A group of 10 committed volunteers spent a cool Saturday in November travelling to four yards, raking leaves and pruning back perennials, leaving clean yards ready for the winter. Homeowners were overwhelmed with the kindness and level of support they received from the master gardeners. The event was an opportunity to engage volunteers young and old, and to visit with members of our community who could use additional support and help caring for their yards.
Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.