University of Illinois Extension provides support for community gardens serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties in numerous ways.

Community gardens are places where a group of people garden to collectively share the produce or grow produce for themselves in individual plots within a larger garden. Community gardens provide fresh produce, while also building community and connection to the environment. Research from University of Utah found that community gardeners are less likely to be overweight or obese compared to their non-gardening neighbors.

However various pitfalls can turn noble intentions into negative neighborhood drama. University of Illinois Extension helps reduce these problems through education about proper planning, effective communication, simple rules, and basic garden knowledge. This is accomplished in many ways.

An important safety aspect was tackled in 2017 with a collaboration between the Peoria City/County Health Department and University of Illinois Extension, Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit. They developed a factsheet and public awareness campaign to highlight the importance of avoiding lead-contaminated soil during the gardening season.

Rhonda Ferree, Extension educator in horticulture, worked with colleagues across Illinois to create a new community garden leader training series on YouTube. It contains educational modules on various topics, from organizing a garden to harvesting a crop. Community garden leaders can mix-and-match the modules to fit their garden needs in a timely manner.

Extension offices receive many requests asking for help from Master Gardeners with new community gardens. Since most Master Gardeners already have projects, it is often difficult to meet these requests. Thus, a new initiative was initiated in Peoria County that will pilot how to better support community gardens in the Peoria area. The goal is to provide trusted resources, develop networks, and answer gardening questions that arise throughout the growing season to assure that groups can have successful and sustainable gardens.

Additionally, Master Gardeners have a few food garden projects that serve as gift and learning gardens. They have giving gardens that grow produce to give to food pantries and other community centers. Examples are found in Morton, Washington, Canton, Peoria, Havana, and beyond. They also have learning gardens that show homeowners how to grow their own produce. Master Gardeners assist with these at Illinois Central College, Luthy Botanical Garden, Wildlife Prairie Park, and more.

Resources are available online, including the Community Gardening Toolkit from University of Missouri Extension. View these on Rhonda Ferree's ILRiverHort Blog Community Garden links at go.illinois.edu/ILRiverHort.