

How Do We Get Our Food?

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

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This week, the Extension office will be hosting our annual Ag Days program. This program brings fourth grade students from around Vanderburgh County out to the 4-H Center, where they can get a hands-on demonstration on the importance of agriculture, where their food comes from, and the agricultural by-products they use every day.

We've done this program for over thirty years here in Vanderburgh County; my colleagues in neighboring counties have their own Ag Days programs. We do this because society has become removed from our agricultural origins, and many people do not have an appreciation for the important jobs of our farmers, or the realities of farm life.

This goes beyond people not knowing where their food comes from. I mean, sure, I have gone to classrooms and asked the kids where pizza sauce comes from ("the pizza factory," they tell me). And I've had kids tell me that corn comes from a can, and watermelons grow on trees. I expect these kinds of misconceptions from children, especially those who live in town and have never had the chance to grow their own food.

But a lot of this unfamiliarity stays with people as they become adults. I've sat in on zoning meetings where people, who just bought a brand new home downwind of a farm, complain about the noises, smells, and dust from the farms next door. I once heard a woman, complaining about a nearby dairy farm, ask in all seriousness, "Why can't those farmers just get their milk from the store like the rest of us?"

In trying to explain about the importance of agricultural biotechnology (GMOs, etc.) to someone, I had to keep backing up to explain how GMOs are created, and the economics of modern agriculture, and various techniques available to control pests. When he couldn't understand why weeds were a problem to farmers in the first place, I had to give up.

At our Ag Days, my Master Gardeners and I usually have a station called "Math on the Farm." We introduce the kids to agricultural units of measurement, like acres and bushels. We show them how a farmer can calculate how much money he can earn from growing an acre of corn, based on the grain prices from that morning's edition of the Courier-Press. We hold up a poster showing all of the expenses a farmer has to pay just to grow that corn, and then teach the students how to calculate profit. In the

years that corn prices were low, I've watched the kids' jaws drop as they realize that the farmer barely earned enough to buy a pizza for his family with that acre of corn. The year that we calculated that the farmer LOST money was difficult, because fourth grade students hadn't learned about negative numbers yet.

If you want to check out our Ag Days program and learn more about farming, contact the Vanderburgh County Extension Office at 812-435-5287 and ask about the schedule for this week.