

# FarmFest: From Soil to Supper

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## OBJECTIVES

- To provide opportunities for local agricultural producers to connect with each other.
- To offer the opportunity for consumers to gain a better understanding of agriculture.
- To connect beginner farmers and gardeners with local resources.
- To provide youth the opportunity to compete in 4-H Chicken Que BBQ competition.



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2023, a needs assessment exercise revealed that local producers were interested in cooperating with Alabama Extension to offer beginning farmer resources. In February of that year, the program was offered as a joint effort with multiple community partners to provide education for beginning farmers. In 2024 the event was repeated with the addition of the 4-H BBQ chicken competition, as well as a pop-up farmers market.

In 2025 the event was enhanced by having the following activities:

- Indoor vendor space for educational and resource agencies around agriculture as well as partner agencies such as Russell County Cattlemen's Association, Russell County Farmers Federation, local community garden representatives, grocery stores and health care providers
- Outdoor exhibit area consisted of a pop-up vegetable market with local vendors and a mobile health unit for youth to travel through healthy activities
- Ignite Educational Sessions
- Multi county 4-H BBQ chicken competition for youth
- Door prize drawing sponsored by the Russell County Farmers Federation
- Lunch offered by Russell County Cattlemen's Association and grilled by local culinary arts students

The event was held at the Fort Mitchell Historic site in Fort Mitchell, AL. Fort Mitchell is a community adjacent to the U.S. Army Base, Fort Moore. The Fort Mitchell area houses active duty and early retired military from all over the nation interested in producing their own food and being more self-sustainable. The Russell County Extension office provides leadership for the event.

## ACTIVITIES

Local and regional agencies provided one-on-one educational opportunities covering soil testing, beekeeping, online resources, funding options, and support for new producers. Alabama Extension educators hosted 30-minute Ignite Sessions on topics such as estate planning, seed starting, backyard chickens, fire ant control, cotton production, farm business planning, and beekeeping.

Russell County Extension's Health and Wellness team partnered with Alabama A&M to offer a Mobile Health Unit, engaging youth and adults with interactive games on healthy living.

Nine youth from three school districts (up from five in 2024) competed in the Chicken Que 4-H BBQ Competition, enhancing their knowledge of chicken's economic, nutritional, and culinary value. They prepared chicken thighs on charcoal grills under time constraints, were evaluated on fire safety, and answered judges' questions on preparation, safety, and nutrition.



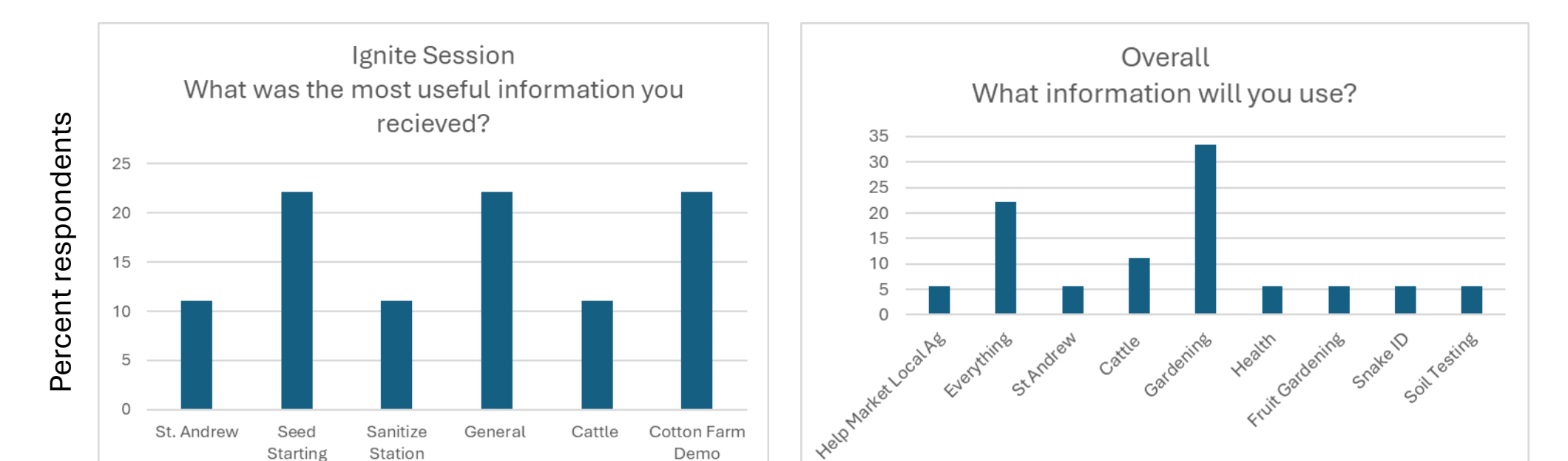
*Connecting farmers and producers with consumers is especially important today. Most people don't live on farms and don't understand how hard farming can be. This gives a chance to tell our story.*  
--Becky Martin Russell County Farmers Federation

## OUTCOMES

### Impact

Farm Fest has become a vital agricultural education and networking event in Russell County, Alabama. Since its start in 2023, attendance and offerings have grown, with 300 participants in 2025, including beginner farmers, home gardeners, and experienced producers. Surveys showed 51% of attendees were Russell County residents, with visitors from neighboring states. Gardening education was the main draw for 57% of participants, and 33% planned to apply gardening techniques learned at the event. New additions in 2025 included an indoor vendor space for agricultural agencies, a mobile health unit for youth, and expanded Ignite Sessions covering seed starting, estate planning, and farm business development. The 4-H Chicken Que BBQ competition also grew, with youth participation rising from five in 2024 to nine in 2025.

Led by Russell County Extension and supported by partners like the Russell County Cattlemen's Association, Farm Fest strengthens agricultural education, fosters connections, and promotes self-sustainability in local food systems.



### Evaluation

Surveys showed that 51% of visitors were Russell County residents, with others from Lee County (14%), Georgia (17%), and Florida (2%). Most attendees were home gardeners, with 57% motivated by gardening resources and education. Key Ignite Session topics included: **seed starting (22%), farm demos (22%),** and local food waste initiatives (11%).

Of those surveyed, **33% planned to use gardening techniques from the event,** and 22% found all sessions valuable. The event also reinforced connections to local farmers markets, with most attendees reporting annual visits. Alabama Extension will continue leading Farm Fest, refining evaluations and marketing to enhance its regional impact.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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