Pondera County is located in the heart of the Golden Triangle, famous for quality wheat and malt barley production. Grain and livestock production provide approximately $70 million in gross revenue. The county contains 1,625 square miles and is very rural with approximately 6,400 residents in the communities of Conrad, Valier, Dupuyer, Brady, and Heart Butte, and there are five Hutterite Colonies.

The elevation varies from 3300’ on the eastern plains to 8500’ at the Continental Divide. Major watersheds include the Marias and Teton River drainages. Lake Frances near Valier and the Lake Elwell – Tiber system supply irrigation and household water to many of the county’s residents.

Other crops include alfalfa, seed canola, lentils and chickpeas. Unique to Pondera County is a mustard processing plant which purchases mustard seed from all over the state and southern Alberta.

Schools, medical care, retirement homes and hunting are important economic contributors in Pondera County. The Pondera Medical Center is the largest employer and serves a multi-county area with an economic impact of over $12 million.

Pondera County has four 4-H clubs with 92 youth and 31 leaders. Top 4-H projects include beef, swine, shooting sports, sewing, and horse. Fundraising and Marias Fair sponsors generously support the activities the 4-H members and leaders.

The MSU Extension Pondera County office has two Extension agents, Wendy Wedum and Adriane Good, who provide leadership in family and consumer science, agriculture, and the 4-H youth development program.

Peaks to Prairies: Pondera County has the best Montana offers. Photo by Wendy Wedum.
Succulent Savvy

In recent years, succulents have become a popular family of plants. They come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and colors, and are easy to care for. The term succulent is used to cover a broad category of plants that can store moisture in their stems, roots, and leaves. One succulent species is native to Montana and is our state flower – the Bitterroot.

Just before Mother’s Day, MSU Extension hosted a succulent workshop in partnership with Marias Greenhouse. Approximately 20 succulent enthusiasts from Pondera County and three surrounding counties gathered to learn about different succulent varieties, care requirements, how to propagate succulents from leaf cuttings, and how to make an attractive arrangement. Lynne Knobel, owner of Marias Greenhouse, offered an assortment of plants, containers, and decorative mosses and gravel. Thanks to the variety of options, the arrangements varied from simple glass containers with one plant to larger containers with complementary plants arranged around each other.

This program was well-received by the community, with some remarking it was a fun social evening as well as a great learning opportunity. One attendee noted that she found it a great way to get to know people in the community. There were a few mother-daughter pairs who were able to celebrate Mother’s Day early with an evening of horticulture-based bonding. Marias Greenhouse benefited from co-hosting the workshop as they profited from the extra traffic brought in and people buying plants locally instead of traveling to a bigger city to shop.

Pressure Canner Best Practice

Home food preservation has many benefits. People can control the amounts of sugar and salt in their food, save money on groceries when produce is home-grown, and provide high quality food for their family.

Food preservation is a well-researched topic. How food will be processed is just as important as the food’s preparation and the cleanliness of the jars and kitchen. Proper canning practices remove oxygen, destroy enzymes, prevent the growth of undesirable bacteria, yeasts, and molds, and help form a high vacuum in jars. Good vacuums form tight seals which keep liquid in and air and microorganisms out.
Low-acid foods must be pressure-canned in order to reach the high temperatures that kill many naturally-occurring bacteria that were not killed by washing, removing bruises, damage and spoilage.

Pressure canners have two types of gauges, a dial gauge or a weighted gauge. A dial gauge needs to be tested annually to make sure the correct processing temperatures are reached. If the correct temperatures are not reached, there is a greater potential for bacteria to grow and multiply. One in particular, *Clostridium botulinum*, creates a toxin that causes botulism, a neurotoxin that can be fatal or leave long lasting neurological effects.

Dial gauge testing is a simple test that takes about five minutes. It ensures that the gauge is reading the correct pressure during the cooking process. Gauges that do not pass the test need to be replaced to avoid foodborne illnesses. MSU Extension offers gauge testing and instruction on how to test gauges, as well as factsheets with the most up-to-date canning information.

The Best of Both Worlds - 4-H Horse & Livestock Camp

Horse and livestock 4-H members from Pondera, Glacier, Toole, and Liberty counties gathered on a warm weekend in June for fun and learning about their horse and livestock projects. Members got to learn about a variety of topics, including horsemanship, livestock judging, round robin showmanship, proper tack, roping, ration formulation for livestock projects, marketing, the basics of horse health, and the differences in eating habits and digestive tracts of horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats.

4-H members appreciated the learning experiences and the practice of skills that they can use throughout their 4-H career. During the round robin showmanship workshop, everyone in attendance had the opportunity to practice showing every species, giving them early and varied experience before the Marias Fair competitions. At the livestock judging practice, members spent the afternoon learning how to judge livestock and practicing verbal reasoning for interviews. During roping practice, skilled ropers taught 4-H members the proper way to swing and throw the rope, leading to many excited whoops as the kids finally “caught” their fence post. Through all the workshops, there were many instances of mentoring between the older and younger 4-H members and a sense of community was developed.

In addition to all the learning, 4-H members got to have some fun. They were treated to root beer floats, watched a movie both nights of camp, did a nail and string art activity, had a horse relay, and capped the weekend with a very competitive horse and livestock quiz bowl. By Sunday morning, campers were full of smiles and begging to stay a little longer because they enjoyed camp so much.