WHATS NEW

NEWS FROM THE FOOD SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY EXTENSION SPECIALISTS | Fall 2026 Issue

Upcoming Trainings

Packinghouse Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)

1 - HACCP graphic

Date: TBD

Time: TBD

Location: Live, Online via Zoom (Zoom link to be sent the week of the course)

Intended Audience: For individuals working in produce packinghouse who need to develop and document a food safety management program based on the principles of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems.

Cost: $250

Learn More and Register: The December 2026 course has been canceled.

Bookmark this site

2 - Graphic of a computer screen featuring the Program page on Register VCE.

Not all of our offerings get featured in our newsletter but you can stay up to-date on current workshops and courses by checking our Food & Health program page on register.ext.edu. or by clicking here to go directly to the page.

Accommodations for Events

If you are a person with a disability and desire assistance or accommodation, please notify Stephanie Slocum by email at sslocum@vt.edu or call 540-231-4124 during business hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. For all events, please discuss accommodations 5 to 10 days prior to any events.

Ongoing or On-Demand Workshops

Home Food Preservation

3 - A collection of ten glass jars filled with preserved foods, including tomatoes, pickles, corn, and fruit, arranged on two wooden shelves.

This short self-paced course will provide participants with the basic knowledge of safe home food preservation methods. It will discuss the science behind the specific methods that are used for home food preservation and introduce the learner to various methods of home food preservation (canning, freezing, dehydration, fermentation) using step-by-step guidance.

Course Schedule: The training will be self-paced and offered online via Canvas.

Cost: $15

For more information and to register:
https://register.ext.vt.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=1208936&selectedProgramAreaId=25579&selectedProgramStreamId=

Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce - Produce Growers/Farmers Market Produce Vendors (Virtual Program)

4 - A photo from a Farmers market with grapes, apples, potatoes, and a chalkboard sign that says Farmers Market and another smaller sign with 100% Organic on it.

Many farmers will sell their produce at farmers markets, which is one way to get their produce into their community, support the local economy, and increase profits. The safety of produce is essential for their continued growth so consumers have confidence in their products.

This self-paced course will provide you the knowledge to understand the science and causes of foodborne illness, the best practices to decrease the risk of contaminating produce, and how to safely display and sell produce at the market. Some of the topics covered in this course include:land use; water use; manure and soil amendments; hygiene, health, and training; toilet and handwashing facilities; harvesting and storage; transporting produce safety; and food safety at the market.

This course is intended for produce growers and farmers market produce vendors. This course does not meet the requirements set by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and is designed for those farms which are not covered by, or are exempt from, the Produce Safety Rule.

Course Schedule: The training will be self-paced and offered online via Canvas.

Cost: $5

For more information and to register:
https://register.ext.vt.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=1362590&selectedProgramAreaId=25579&selectedProgramStreamId=

Support for Virginia's Entrepreneurs and Food Industries

FOOD PRODUCER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK

The Food Producer Technical Assistance Network, led by FST faculty member and Extension Specialist Melissa Wright, helps food entrepreneurs understand how to produce safe, market-ready products. Since 1991, the program has supported Virginia's food industry by offering guidance in key areas.

The FOOD PRODUCER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK offers guidance in the following areas:

- ***starting a food business***
- ***navigating food safety requirements***
- ***developing nutrition labels***

- ***understanding state and federal regulations***

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5 - FST faculty member and Extension Specialist Melissa Wright is evaluating items for the Food Producer Technical Assistance Network

Through expert guidance and science-based evaluations, the program strengthens Virginia's food sector by helping producers create safe, high-quality, compliant products.

The specific services and associated costs are as follows:

- Product Evaluation, Process Validation, and Scheduled Process Letter for Acidified Foods: $175
- Food Product Evaluation and Report (includes pH and water activity analysis; no scheduled process letter issued): $145
- Nutrition Facts Label Calculation: $138
- Other services such as label review or ingredient statement assistance outside of laboratory evaluation and report: $114/hour

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A request for these services can be made online here: Request for Analysis

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Recent Publications

Consumer Guide to Virginia's Finfish

The *Consumer Guide to Virginia's Finfish* explains the different finfish commonly available in Virginia and provides practical information to help consumers identify, select, purchase, and store fish safely and effectively. It is designed to help buyers make informed seafood choices while maintaining quality and freshness from purchase through preparation.

Ellis, L., Dong, M., Sun, T.,Schwarz, M., van Senten, J., Feng, Y., (2026). The Consumers Guide to Virginia's Finfish. Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication FST-520.

Available online: https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/FST/fst-520-consumer-guide-to-virginias-finfish.html

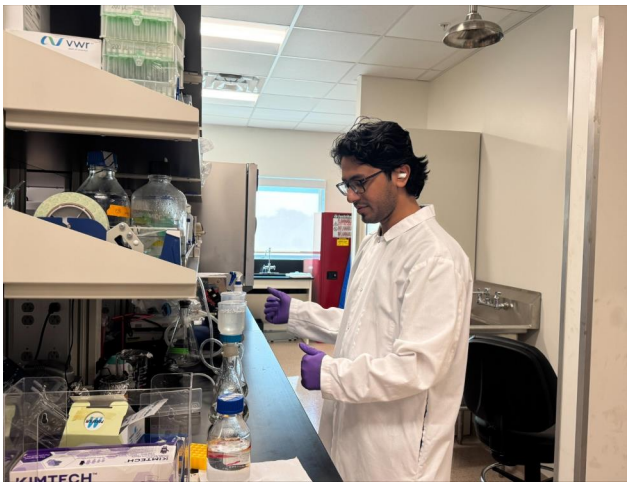
Featured Graduate Students

Summer Research Highlight

Imam Hossain joined the Food Science and Technology Ph.D. program in Spring 2026. His research focuses on food safety and public health, with an emphasis on seafood microbial safety and pathogen monitoring. In late June, he began a summer research project at the Virginia Seafood Agricultural Research and Extension Center (VSAREC), where he is receiving training in digital PCR, molecular pathogen detection, and laboratory methods for seafood safety research.

6 - Headshot of Imam

7 - Imam is pictured on the far right.



8 - Imam is pictured in a white lab coat working on lab activities.

9 - Imam is pictured in the lab smiling at the camera.

FST Graduate Student Chosen for Inaugural CALS Pilot Extension Graduate Assistantship

10 - Monica Osorio Barahona

Monica Osorio Barahona joined the FST department in Fall 2023 and after successfully completing the master's program she continued on as a Ph.D. student. For the upcoming 2026-27 academic year Monica was selected to receive one of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Pilot Extension Graduate Assistantships. As a CALS Extension Graduate Assistant, she will work on translating research-based knowledge into practical resources and educational programming that support Virginia communities and strengthen connections between the university and its stakeholders. One of her primary projects for 2026/27 will be to develop a Food Safety 101 course specifically for Virginia Cooperative Extension agents. This was a highly competitive assistantship, and Monica was one of only four students selected from a pool of 12 applicants. Her selection reflects her outstanding academic achievements, commitment to Extension and outreach, and strong potential as a future leader in the field.

In addition to this honor, Monica continues to earn recognition for her academic and professional accomplishments. She was selected, along with fellow FST graduate student Bhaswati Chowdhury, as a recipient of a 2026 International Association for Food Protection (IAFP) Student Travel Scholarship, a competitive award recognizing academic excellence, research contributions, and dedication to advancing food safety and public health. Monica also successfully completed the 2026 Center for Produce Safety Professional Development Program, further demonstrating her commitment to scientific excellence and leadership in produce safety.

Congratulations to Monica on these well-deserved achievements and continued success.

Featured Program

Virginia Cooperative Extension Hosts A Regional Home Food Preservation Conference

11 - Lester Schonberger

Photo credit: Case Keatley

12 - A photo taken of the larger group of participants at the Home Food Preservation Conference

13 - Lester Schonberger is talking with participants during a hands on portion of the conference.

14 - Participants are shown leaned over a table working on a hands-on canning process.

15 - Lester Schonberger is talking with a woman who is mixing something in a silver bowl.

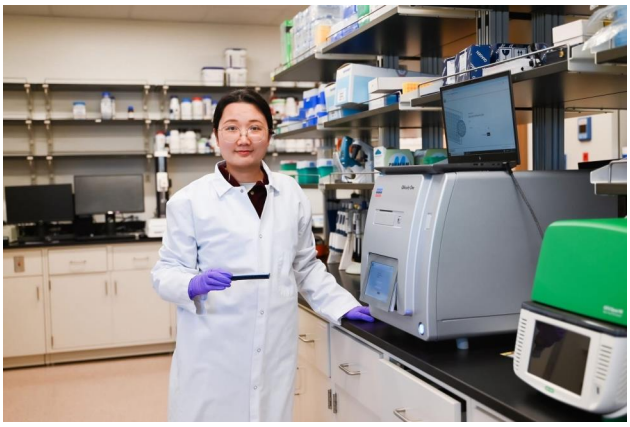
16 - Lester Schonberger is shown listening to a question.

In early August, Lester Schonberger joined Virginia Cooperative Extension agents, volunteers, and specialists from across Southwest Virginia for VCE's first regional Home Food Preservation Conference in Wytheville. The day-long event brought 76 participants together to learn safe,

research-based food preservation practices, explore food traditions, and connect with others interested in preserving food at home. Lester co-presented a session on the science behind home food preservation with Dawn Barnes (FCS - Floyd/Montgomery) and later co-led hands-on sauerkraut fermentation workshops with Brandi Pettey (FCS - Lee/Scott) and Kristen Gibson (FCS - Russell/Tazewell), helping participants build practical skills for safely preserving foods at home.

Photo credit: Case Keatley, VCE

Featured Extension Specialist



17 - Dr. Mengyi Dong is shown in a laboratory

Dr. Mengyi Dong is a Food Science and Technology Extension Specialist based out of the Virginia Seafood Agricultural and Extension Research Center (AREC) in Hampton, VA. Currently her work is primarily focused on building on molecular approaches to advance seafood safety and literacy, aquaculture, and aquatic environmental health in order to help protect Virginia's seafood industry and the coastal communities. In addition to her research and Extension work, Dr. Dong will serve as the primary advisor for two Ph.D students this fall.

Dr. Dong was recently featured in a New York Times article titled **The Future of Nutrition Research May Run Through the Sewer** for her work as a lead author of a study where she played a central role in developing and applying a wastewater analysis method. Dr. Dong and others on her team helped identify food DNA fragments in wastewater samples collected from approximately 2.1 million North Carolina residents, demonstrating that researchers could detect hundreds of consumed foods and identify dietary patterns at the community level. The work showed how wastewater can serve as a cost effective tool for monitoring nutrition across large populations. However promising, Dong also emphasized some of the scientific limitations of the approach. The study noted that certain foods produce stronger DNA signals than others. For example, leafy greens contain many more chloroplasts and are easier to detect than foods such

as potatoes, while highly processed foods like refined sugar leave little detectable DNA. The studies findings help researchers better understand both the promise and the challenges of using wastewater to study dietary habits (Bajaj, 2026).

Bajaj, S. (2026, July 20). The Future of Nutrition Research May Run Through the Sewer. The New York Times.

Find the New York Times article online here: https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/20/science/sewer-diet-research.html

Read the full study here: https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2530704123

Other News

We wanted to share that Alexis Hamilton is no longer with the department. We are grateful for her contributions and wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

FST Extension Specialists

Not sure who to contact with your question? We are here to help make that easier.

Please refer to the Areas of Expertise section below to find the Extension Specialist who can best assist you. If you are unsure who to reach out to, simply contact our Outreach Coordinator, Stephanie Slocum, at sslocum@vt.edu and she will be happy to connect you with the appropriate specialist and help ensure your question reaches the right person.

18 - Dr. Mengyi Dong, Assistant Professor

Dr. Mengyi Dong, Assistant Professor

Email: mengyidong@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Seafood quality and safety | Guidance on engineering, quality control, and safety practices

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/mengyi-dong.html

19 - Dr. David Kuhn , Associate Professor & Extension Specialist

Dr. David Kuhn, **Associate Professor & Extension Specialist**

Email: davekuhn@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Aquaculture Producers | fish and shellfish production systems and operations

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/dkuhn.html

20 - Dr. Demi Perry, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist

Dr. Demi Perry, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist

Email: dmperry@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Enology, fruit chemistry, and consumer perception | support for wine production

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/demi-perry.html

21 - Dr. Lester Schonberger, Associate Extension Specialist

Dr. Lester Schonberger, Associate Extension Specialist

Email: hlschon@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Food handlers & consumers | ServSafe training, food safety education, and home food preservation support

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/lschonberger.html

22 - Dr. Laura Strawn, Professor & Extension Specialist

Dr. Laura Strawn, Professor & Extension Specialist

Email: Lstrawn@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Fresh produce growers, packers, and retailers | Assistance with regulation compliance and best practices

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/lstrawn.html

23 - Dr. Taozhu Sun, Extension Specialist

Dr. Taozhu Sun, Muscle Food Safety Extension Specialist

Email: taozhu@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Meat, poultry, and seafood products | Support for processing, safety, and quality of meat

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/taozhu-sun.html

24 - Melissa Wright,Food Producer Technical Assistance Network & Extension Specialist

Melissa Wright, Director, Food Producer Technical Assistance Network & Extension Specialist

Email: mswright@vt.edu

Area of Expertise: Entrepreneurs & Food Startups | Labeling requirements, process authority needs, regulatory guidance

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/faculty/mwright.html

Contact Us

Virginia has unique needs and opportunities across its food and agricultural industries, and we are here to help. Whether you are seeking technical assistance, interested in scheduling a workshop, exploring training opportunities, or looking for support with a specific challenge, we encourage you to reach out.

For more information, to request workshops, or to discuss other Extension related activities, please contact:

25 - Stephanie Slocum

Stephanie Slocum, Academic and Outreach Coordinator

Email: sslocum@vt.edu

Phone: 540-231-4124

Website: https://www.fst.vt.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/staff/stephanie-slocum.html

Interested in reading more from the FST Extension Specialist? Visit our newsletter section (under the FST Extension Newsletter heading on https://www.fst.vt.edu/news-and-events/newsletters.html

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26 - Virginia Cooperative Extension logo

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