

Editor's Corner: Extension's Response to Y2K

The first time someone asked me what I thought about Y2K, I had no idea what he was talking about. Since then, I have learned more than I ever wanted to know. So, what is the Y2K problem?

My favorite explanation of the Y2K problem is that beginning January 1, 2000, the months of the year will be spelled as follows: Januark, Februark, March, April, Mak, June, Julk, August, September, October, November, and December. Unfortunately, the problem isn't this simple.

The Y2K problem actually started decades ago when computer programmers represented years by their last two digits. For example, the year 1975 was represented and stored as 75. This method has never been a problem - at least it won't be until the year 2000. When the digits roll over to 00, the computer may not know if those digits mean 2000 or 1900. So, the clocks in some computer chips may be turned back a hundred years, potentially causing all kinds of problems.

Items in the home that may experience Y2K problems include telephones, answering machines, VCRs, entertainment systems, computers, fax machines, security systems, cameras, camcorders, and bread machines. Items in a business that may experience Y2K problems include most of the above plus safes or vaults; fire alarms; copiers; mainframe computers; postage machines; door locks; time clocks; air conditioning, ventilating, and heating systems; escalators; lighting; programmable thermostats; sprinkler systems; and so on. Manufacturers of the products should be able to tell you if the computer chips in their products will have a Y2K problem.

Basically, I have found that there are four reactions to Y2K: (1) Y2 what? (2) Skepticism. (3) It's a problem, but we can fix it. (4) The sky is falling.

Extension Family and Consumer Educators are getting questions mostly from the fourth group. Food preservation questions, such as where to buy large tin and other metal containers, or how to store large quantities of flour and other food stuffs, are predominant. People have caught Y2K fever, and they are becoming survivalists. Panic seems to be escalating, and Extension educators are asking "What is Extension's role?"

Clearly, Extension cannot ignore the problem because problems are likely to occur when the clocks roll over to 12:01 a.m., January 1, 2000. Whether the problems will be as minor as your VCR not taping your favorite soap opera, or whether there will be a world crisis remains to be seen. The CEO of a major computer software company recently predicted that any economic slowdown caused by Y2K would be slight, if any. I was at the conference where he said it, and I take great comfort in his words. After all, he should know, shouldn't he?

The challenge for Extension is not to incite further panic, and if possible, to ease existing panic. Franklin D. Roosevelt's words that we have nothing to fear but fear itself apply to Y2K. We may have a financial crisis if all investors withdraw their money from financial institutions in December 1999. A self-fulfilling prophecy is more likely to create the disaster than Y2K.

Extension educators' role, in my opinion, is to teach individuals and businesses how to do everything in their power to fix the Y2K problem before it hits. There are a number of Web sites listed at the end of this editorial that provide guidance on how to prepare for Y2K, focusing on empowering people rather than panicking them. I also noticed an entire display of books on the subject the last time I was at the bookstore. I even bought one of them, but found it to be a little more in the "sky is falling" category than its title implied. However, it did come with a 21-page manual of action steps people can take to prepare for Y2K, so it wasn't a total waste of money.

Personally, I don't believe that Y2K will end civilization as we know it. After all, we've put men on the moon. Surely, we can fix what's no more than a computer glitch. I'm reminded of the oil fires that Iraqi troops set in Kuwait at the end of the Persian Gulf War. The doomsday crowd predicted the fires would burn for generations, causing untold environmental damage. Yet, teams of enterprising Americans extinguished the fires in a matter of months.

So, I believe that American ingenuity will solve the Y2K problem before it destroys civilization. In fact, I'm counting on it. I'm not learning how to survive in the wild. I'm not planting my own crops, or learning how to can bread or jerk meat, or how to weave my own cloth. I'm not planning on cleaning out my bank accounts and stuffing my mattress with the loot.

I am going to take reasonable precautions. First, I'm going to find out what I can do to avoid the potential problems in my home and at work. Then I'm planning to store a reasonable amount of nonperishable food stuffs in my pantry. I'm going to have hard copies of all my financial and personal information. I'm going to have a reasonable amount of cash available for stores who have temporary trouble with their credit card systems. I am going to mentally prepare myself for some inconveniences and frustrations. Some problems are likely to occur, mostly caused by the folks and businesses who have done nothing to avoid the problems.

Extension educators must walk a fine line. We can't minimize the problem so that people ignore it. On the other hand, we can't incite further panic, or we will help create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Disaster will strike, not because of Y2K, but because of the collective action of a panicked populace. Our overriding message should be that unlike the forces of nature which we cannot stop, Y2K is man-made and, therefore, can be fixed.

[Y2K Computer Problems](#), North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service

[Is Your Business Y2K Ready?](#) Mississippi State Extension Service

[The Year 2000 Problem](#), Small Business Administration

[Y2K Self Help Tool Support](#)

[USDA Year 2000 Program Office](#), USDA Office of the Chief Information Officer

[President's Council Conversion to Year 2000](#)

[USDA National Information on Technology Center](#)

[General Information](#) Additional links

Letters to the editor may be e-mailed to [Carol A. Schwab](#).