

Sustaining Farming on the Urban Fringe



Monthly Highlights from Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

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1967-2007: Forty Years of Urban Fringe Farming Change

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Tomatoes at 20 tons/acre during the “Summer of Love”

Remember 1967? For millions of today’s Baby Boomers, the summer of ‘67 is fondly recalled as the “Summer of Love.” That summer was different for the 134 New Jersey farmers reporting their yields in the “20-Ton Tomato Club.” Twenty-two year-old G. Alexis Coleman of Elmer, newly graduated from Penn State, recorded the best quality processing fields, producing a crop grading 88.7% U.S. No. 1 fruit and only 0.6% culls. Earl Workman of Moorsetown was top tomato grower with 31.94 tons per acre.

I recently came upon a 1967 report prepared by Rutgers for the *American Vegetable Grower* magazine. With this month’s timely release of the 2007 US Census of Agriculture, it is instructive to compare New Jersey’s farming landscape then and now. Where are we 40 years later?

“New” Rutgers Agricultural Research and Extension Center

To research and transfer advances to a changing New Jersey farming scene, the Rutgers Board of Trustees had only recently allocated \$208,000 and purchased three adjoining farms, totaling 264 acres, establishing the Rutgers Agricultural Research and Extension Center (RAREC) in Upper Deerfield Township. RAREC owed its existence, then and now, to foresighted growers, local businesses, extension workers, and Rutgers administrators. Through 40-years of changes farming the Garden State, RAREC has continued delivering research-based farming solutions; sustaining livelihoods of thousands of New Jersey farm families.

Rising Farmland Values Lead to “Impermanence”

In the 1960s, everyone observed horticultural industries were under pressure to change. As reported to the *American Vegetable Grower*, “New Jersey growers are fighters, but when land costs soar as high as \$40,000 an acre it’s time to be sensible, not sentimental.” Trends included:

- Urbanization problems and threats from housing encroachment, commerce encroachment, and industry moving onto farmland. If it was good to farm, it was easy to build on. Today New Jersey has the Right-to-Farm Act, and a new publication with Farmland Preservation entitled “Farmer-to-



Rutgers Cooperative Extension engineer demonstrating experimental asparagus harvester, South Jersey, circa late 1960s.

Farmer Advice for Avoiding Conflicts with Neighbors and Towns,” at <http://www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/publications>.

- North Jersey land values were approaching \$40,000, and growers were moving to South Jersey for lower land costs with room for expansion. Predictions were that 80% of New Jersey’s horticulture would move to South Jersey by 1975. Despite land losses, professionals considered that plenty of land capable of profitable vegetable farming remained in New Jersey. Wow, times have changed. Today, farmland values in South Jersey’s Gloucester County approach \$50,000 to 100,000 per acre.

- High farmland taxes, even after 1965 passage of the Farmland Tax Assessment Act. This Act was the first time New Jersey urban dwellers joined forces with their farming neighbors to retain farmland open space. Now we have 170,000 acres of Preserved Farmland, a host of planning tools, and someday soon may have to “Take equity off the table,” as an entry barrier for a new generation of urban fringe farmers.

Responding to rapid land use change, there were already 822 roadside farm markets by 1967, promising increasing sales direct to customers. Growers interviewed believed their futures depended on availability of labor and success of mechanization. They felt accepting and adapting to change was their strength.

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Selected New Jersey and Farm Information

	1967	2007	Notes
Approx. total NJ farm cash receipts	\$302 million	\$987 million	\$82 bil expanded food industry
Approx. Total Wholesale vegetables	About \$79 million, Ranked 6 th in US acres and value.	About \$182 million	Vegetables largest sector in 1967.
Approx. Total Wholesale Nursery, Turf, Grnhse Crops.	Not available.	About \$443 million, Ranking 7 th in US.	327 operations with sales > \$10,000 on 21,503 acres
Hourly Minimum Wage, Seasonal Labor	\$1.40 per hour, above state and national min.	\$7.15 per hour	Most workers today earn well above minimums.
NJ Farmland Taxes.	About \$14 per acre. Up from \$9.60 in 1960.	About \$75-80 per acre. Ouch.	2002 national average was \$5.70 per acre.
Farms with direct sales of food	About 822	1,931	Consumable products
Community Farmers Markets	Not available	95 markets attended by approx. 256 farms	
Agritourism	Not available	\$57.5 million revenues. 20% of NJ farms now offer.	\$0.58 generated in community for every \$1. (+\$33 million)
Certified Organic Acres	0	2,444 acres from 60 farm applicants	Still < 1% NJ farm revenues.
Food Safety	Dairy and Livestock practices.	32 farms pass 3 rd Party Audits in addition.	800 farmers trained in Good Ag Practices (GAPs)
NJ Population	6.8 million residents	8.7 million residents	Prediction of 8 mil by 1980s; growth slowed. 8 mil in 90s
NJ Residents per square mile	774	1,134	India has about 800 per square mile.
NJ Land in Farms	1.1 million acres	733,400 acres. 17% of NJ landmass. 50% of NJ open space.	US Farmland 1.1 billion vs. 925 million acres
NJ Farms	10,000, dropping < 9,000 for a decade.	10,327, increased back 60s levels.	US Farms 3.1 million vs. 2.2 million
NJ Farm Size	120 acres	71 acres	US Farm Size 350 vs. 418 acres today.
Average NJ Farmland Real Estate Values	Under \$1,000 statewide average.	\$11,300. 4 th highest after RI, MA, CT.	DE and MD are 5 th and 6 th .
Preserved Farmland	Insignificant. Some conservation easements & estates.	About 170,000 acres and 1,700 farms	Approx. ¼ farmland now in preservation or conservation.
Deer Fencing, Publicly Funded	0	1.4 million feet 1998-2007	No one predicted wildlife damage.
Asparagus No. 1 1967 crop	7,000 acres fresh; 18,700 processed. \$3.5 and \$6.8 mil.	1,100 acres fresh market; \$3.8 mil.	Distant 3 rd in US behind CA and MI.
Peppers No. 1 crop 2007	Not available	3,200 acres \$27.8 mil	

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Just as we do today, Rutgers Cooperative Extension in the 1960s conducted educational field days for farmers and the public; teaching new practices and methods to keep pace with competitive changes.

Horticulture Production Innovations

Low cost poly greenhouses were a new production method for vegetables, as were plastic mulches, irrigation, herbicides, and mechanical harvest aids. Innovations included staking fresh market tomatoes, with costs of production about \$3 for a 20 lb box. Asparagus was a huge labor requirement, yet one reason for wide cultivation was asparagus provided early work for seasonal workers and early cash flow.

Investments in irrigation (the most immediately profitable change) and mechanization represented confidence in the future. Farmers were already adopting rye and Sudax cover crops, soil testing, and liming to conserve their soils. Colorado potato beetles were considered a minor pest. Forty years ago, there were nine Cooperative wholesale produce auctions. Auctions and direct wholesale sales handled most of Jersey's produce. It was far easier to sell crops wholesale, with fewer, larger, transactions and less management time and cost devoted to customer relationships.

What investments and changes would New Jersey farmers report to us today representing their confidence in farming New Jersey's urban fringe?

Two-thirds of the US population remains within three hours of New Jersey farms. Transportation costs are bearable, and crops can be marketed at their peak of quality into huge markets with steady demand. However, this nearness to markets tempted growers—then and now—to forego packaging and uniform grading improvements. This was an area of needed improvement identified in 1967. The failure to fully exploit opportunities selling local produce into huge

nearby markets remains a source of farmer and consumer frustration. Too many New Jersey farmers did not adapt to consolidated buying and 52-week marketing by food service and grocery retailers. We have excellent successful farmers, but a less competitive produce industry than in 1967.

What does the public think about farming 40 years after the Summer of Love?

A Public Mind poll, conducted in 2007 by Farleigh Dickinson found among 701 New Jersey likely voters, confidence in the quality and safety of locally grown produce remains high. Two-thirds of respondents say they have “a lot” of confidence in the safety of New Jersey fruits and vegetables. Fifty-seven percent of surveyed residents believe New Jersey grown fruits and vegetables are better than out-of-state produce and thirty-five percent say they are about the same.

Two-thirds of respondents have gone to a farm in the last year to buy or pick fruits and vegetables, to pick pumpkins, or to harvest a Christmas tree. 41% of those surveyed visited a New Jersey farm to participate in agritourism entertainment activities. Who visits a farm for agritourism? Respondents between ages of 30-44 were most likely agritourism visitors, with 85% reporting they had done so. 62% of those surveyed under 30 had visited a farm for agritourism, and 67% of those over 67 had visited farms. One-third (32%) of respondents had visited farms for some other outdoor activity, such as hiking, fishing, or bird watching and 14% visited for a party or special event. Families with children are more likely to see farms as a community resource to visit. □