Fruits & Vegetables

2025 NEW HAMPSHIRE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE STRATEGIC PLAN

Purpose: To summarize the unique opportunities and challenges that impact economically viable fruit and vegetable production in New Hampshire, including berry plants, fruit trees, and organic growing practices and considerations.

What's at Stake?

Fresh, locally grown produce, whether it's from the farm stand, pick-your-own farm, farmers' market, or grocery store, is a vital part of New Hampshire's economy, a crucial part of ensuring community health, and is deeply rooted in our state's cultural identity. Over 1,000 farms—a quarter of the farms in New Hampshire—grow fruits and vegetables, but it has become increasingly challenging to run a viable farm business while doing so. The USDA reports that, since 2012, New Hampshire farm expenditures have been greater than agricultural products sold. To honor New Hampshire's rich agricultural history and maintain its open fields, protect its undeveloped land, and ensure food security for its residents, New Hampshire fruit and vegetable growers must find a way to maintain profitability.

Current Conditions

Fruit production in New Hampshire includes both fruit trees and berries and can vary immensely in scale depending on marketing strategies, labor resources, production methods, and viable growing acreage. No matter the scale, most fruit growers need to have a diversified source of income due to the unique climate, geographic, economic, and regulatory challenges of the region.

New Hampshire fruit growers rarely run a single crop operation. Most operate a diversified farm and have multiple sources of revenue, such as selling value-added products, offering agritourism events, or income from an off-farm job. The average New Hampshire fruit farm's yearly income from agricultural products is $63,131, nearly half of which is from value-added products.

This fruit grower model works well in New Hampshire because small scale producers can manage a small amount of acreage with minimal labor. To warrant the acquisition of technology that reduces labor needs, or the hiring of H-2A employees (foreign nationals temporarily admitted to the United States to work in agricultural jobs) and the time intensive process to recruit them, growers must be invested in scaling up production and entering into new markets.

Unlike perennial fruit crops, vegetable crops are generally raised in an annual system. However, vegetable and fruit growers share many of the same challenges, including labor recruitment, labor retention, market and regulatory uncertainties, and increasingly, unpredictable weather patterns due to a changing climate.

Although 96% of New Hampshire vegetable production acreage is in open field culture, more than 4% of vegetables sold, by dollar, are produced in controlled environment systems. In 1987, Dr. Otho Wells introduced low-cost, season extending high tunnels to the state of New Hampshire to increase annual production of vegetables by lengthening their season and protecting them from the harsh climate. Now, most New Hampshire vegetable producers utilize some degree of environmental control, from row covers and high tunnels to high-tech climate-controlled greenhouses. This technology helps extend the growing season and can transition farms to more reliable and sometimes automated processes, decreasing labor inputs and making New Hampshire's food production more resilient.

Challenges and Opportunities

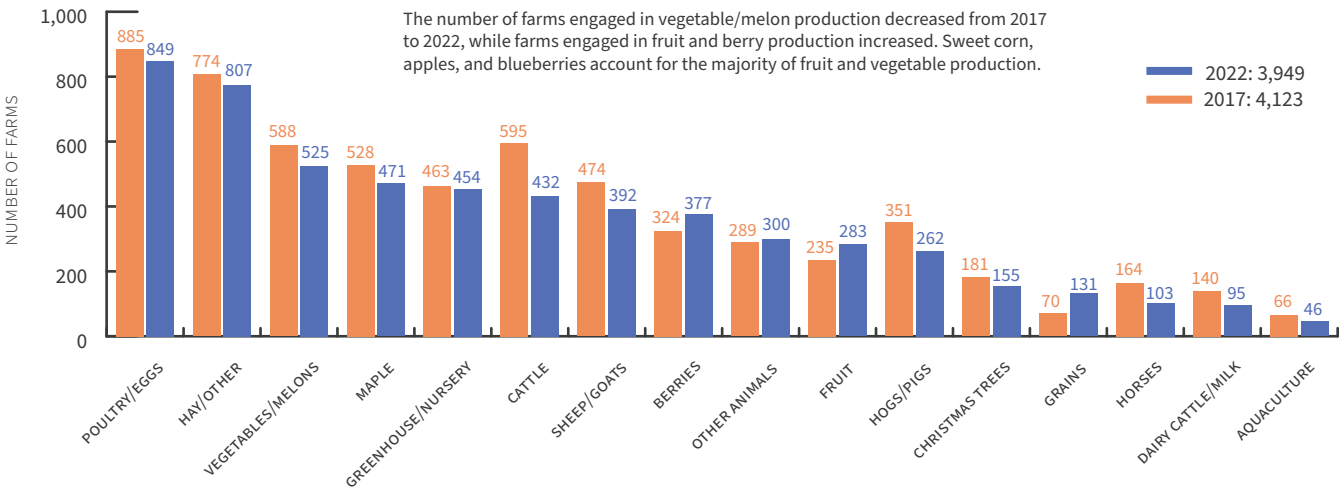
CHALLENGES

- Labor shortages are due to the seasonality of growing crops in New Hampshire, as well as a lack of affordable housing, well-qualified candidates, and more.
- Adapting to changing climate patterns by building climate resilient business and production practices will be paramount to farm viability over time.
- Short seasons and harsh regional growing conditions limit opportunities for farms to create and maintain year-round market opportunities. Limited access to region-specific agricultural inputs and scale-appropriate post-harvest storage and processing further limit the capacity of growers to expand their markets throughout the year.
- Navigating federal and state regulations that are constantly changing. For example, new pesticide regulations from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will require growers to adapt, learn to use new materials, and implement new and different practices as part of Integrated Pest Management systems.
- Accessing and applying for funding opportunities when available is complex, difficult, and time consuming when operating a diversified farm.
- Crop insurance is geared towards large-scale, monoculture operations. In the event of crop loss, New Hampshire growers are being paid out at a national average which is often not reflective of the true loss.
- Lack of public funding in the areas of infrastructure investment, support for farmers' markets, distribution, and on-farm processing equipment.

OPPORTUNITIES

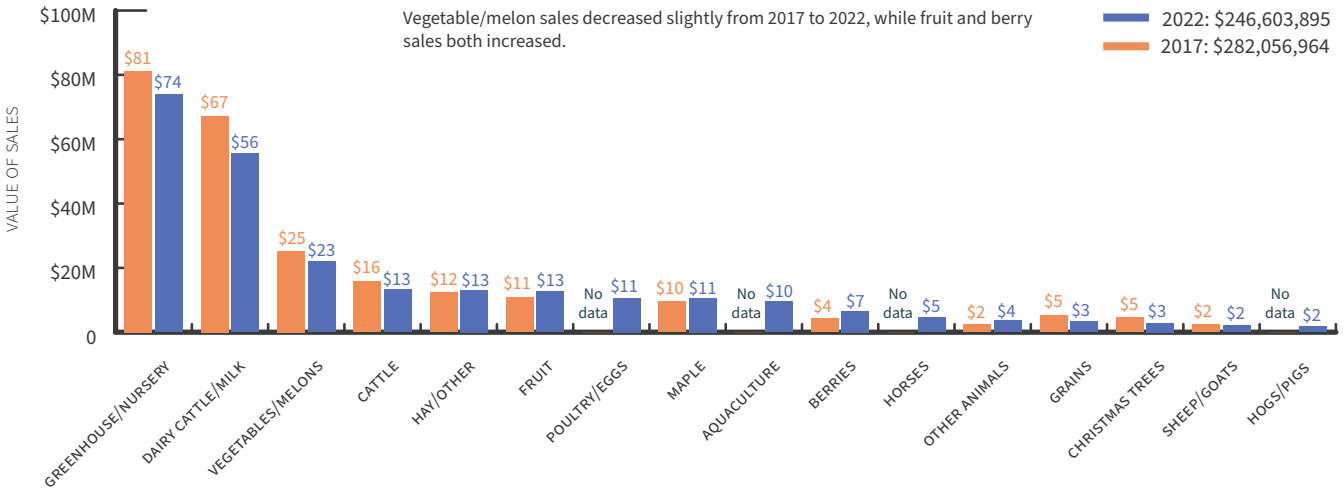
- The NH Fruit Growers Association (NHFGA), the NH Vegetable and Berry Growers Association (NHVBGA), and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Hampshire (NOFA-NH) are three strong associations that strive to promote the interests of the state's vegetable and fruit growers.
- UNH Extension and NHFGA have been working with the USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) to address shortcomings in the policies that impact apple growers in New England, including those around pricing, premiums, record keeping requirements, risk identification, and insurance coverage levels.
- There have been, and continue to be, ongoing research efforts within the NH Agricultural Experiment Station and the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture at the University of New Hampshire to help provide relevant information to UNH Extension to help New Hampshire fruit and vegetable growers overcome challenges.
- NHVBGA is collaborating with researchers to explore disease and climate resistant varieties.
- UNH Extension has knowledgeable specialists and valuable resources pertaining to food safety, greenhouse management, and more. Their New Farmer School and outreach are a crucial system of support for fruit and vegetable growers.
- There is access to abundant direct-to-consumer markets that reach consumers with an interest in supporting local agriculture.
- The USDA's Resilient Food System Infrastructure program grants are beneficial in strengthening the local food chain.

NUMBER OF NEW HAMPSHIRE FARMS ENGAGED IN EACH PRODUCTION CATEGORY, 2017-2022



SOURCE: USDA 2017 and 2022 *Censuses of Agriculture*. Note: responses are not mutually exclusive. Each farm can be engaged in many types of production.

NEW HAMPSHIRE AGRICULTURAL SALES, 2017-2022



SOURCE: USDA 2017 and 2022 *Censuses of Agriculture*. Adjusted for inflation to 2024 dollars with producer price indices. Note: sales values for poultry/eggs, aquaculture, horses, and hogs/pigs were suppressed in 2017, but are included in the total sales value.

Recommendations

Decrease barriers to hiring on-farm help. Reducing barriers to hiring on-farm help could be achieved in the following ways:

- Collaborate with local governments to support zoning changes to allow affordable housing on farm properties, including for employees, to address both housing and labor needs, while introducing a potential revenue stream during shoulder seasons.
- Provide technical assistance to growers interested in navigating the H-2A employment program.
- Develop hands-on apprenticeships and/or incubator opportunities modeled after the Maine Organic Farming Association's Apprenticeship Program and in partnership with UNH Extension's New Farmer School.

- **Conduct multi-area research to extend the growing season and increase resilience against weather events.** Research crops, varieties, practices, and technologies for both season extension and increased resilience against weather related events, including Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) practices, ranging from row covers to greenhouses.

- **Increase support and UNH Extension capacity from the University of New Hampshire.** Two specific areas of support for farmers from the university are:

  - Reinstating the Fruit and Vegetable Extension State Specialist position at UNH Extension.
  - Supporting farmers in accessing funding opportunities, navigating regulatory complexity, and identifying or securing grant writing assistance.

- **Develop a Successful Models Portfolio of economically viable food production models.** Develop a Successful Models Portfolio that examines what models are working in New Hampshire for economically viable food production, what enables that success, and what resources are available for those that want to adopt these models. Include what viable, scale-appropriate options there are for risk management and safety nets through insurance.

- **Educate land preservation committees on agricultural land use and preservation practices.** Develop resources and training that educate land preservation committees on good agricultural land use practices and the benefit of using agriculture and food production as a productive way to preserve land.

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NH FOOD ALLIANCE

This brief was developed through a participatory process led by the NH Food Alliance, a program of the University of New Hampshire. The brief content is comprised of the opinions, perspectives, and information gathered by the authors and participants, and does not necessarily represent those of the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food or the NH Food Alliance.

For more information, including references and opportunities to get involved, visit the 2025 NH Food and Agriculture Strategic Plan web page on nhfoodalliance.org or scan the QR code on the inside front cover of the print version.