

Community Agriculture

By Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

I have heard people say that Grafton County had more agriculture when they were young than it does now. Whether or not that is true probably depends somewhat on your age and perspective. Let's look at the numbers.

According to the 2007 census of agriculture, we have lost nearly two thirds of our dairy farms in the last 20 years. This is certainly a large and stark factor in our changing perceptions, but consider that the number of poultry farms has increased by nearly a third, and vegetable operations have nearly doubled.

In 1987, Grafton County had 356 farms and 80,871 acres of land in farms. In 2007, we had 552 farms and nearly 100,000 acres of land in farms. So over the last twenty years we have actually seen the number of farms and the number of acres in farms increase.

Average farm size is getting smaller, decreasing from 227 acres per farm in 1987 to 181 acres per farm in 2007. Along with the changes in the dairy industry, this may contribute to the impression that agriculture is shrinking in our county, but I still say it isn't entirely true. Rather, the face of agriculture is changing and along with it our perceptions. On the whole, we still live in a community with strong ties to agriculture.

Beyond what is happening on commercial farms, we are also seeing an increased interest in backyard food production. I spoke with a dairy farmer today who sells manure to "backyarders" and he said he has been getting a lot more orders in the last few years. Recent poultry and raspberry production workshops hosted here at the county administration building drew much larger audiences than we anticipated. And I regularly field calls from people who want to start gardening or raising livestock for the first time and need information on how to get started.

The other place we are seeing change is in our interest in local food. How many of us even knew the meaning of the word "locavore" twenty years ago? How many of us shopped at farmer's markets, or knew of a farmer's market within 50 miles of our houses? How many farm stands did we frequent twenty years ago and where did they get their products? How many of us even knew where to find fresh eggs?

It is because of all these things that we at UNH Cooperative Extension in Grafton County launched our new Community Agriculture website (<http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/CommunityAgGC.htm>) this week. We hope this will be the place you go for information on agriculture in your community. You can find links that will tell you where to find local agricultural products and upcoming Extension workshops as well as the factsheets and other handouts from any recent workshops you might have missed. There is also a weekly blog and a kids page with links to educational games and information. Please take a look at the site and join us while we explore the current state of agriculture in Grafton County together.

Look for next weeks column by Deb Maes, Family and Consumer Resources Educator.

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