



# FACTS about Agriculture in Westchester County

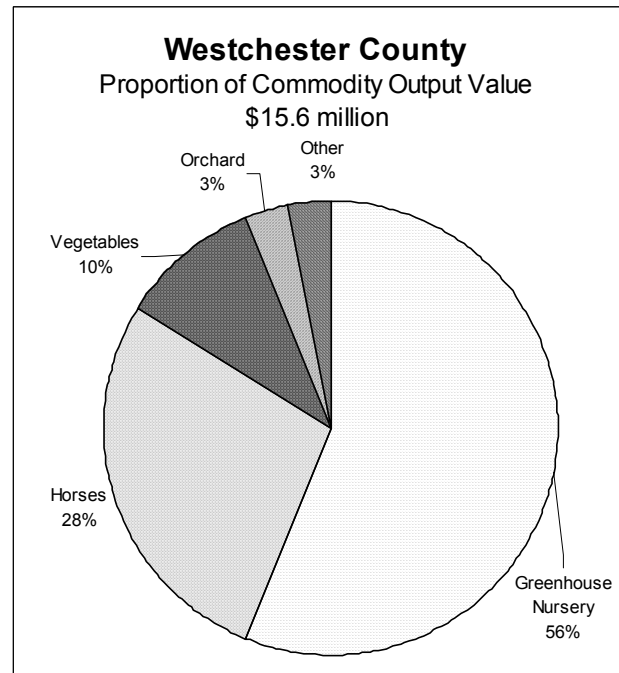
## What is Agriculture in Westchester?

According to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture (1997), more than **7,500 acres** in many of Westchester's 45 municipalities are actively farmed. A farm is defined by the USDA as enterprise that produces at least \$1,000 in agricultural products a year. The number of farms has declined by 25% between 1987 and 1997 – from 121 to 91. The average size of a farm is 83 acres. The County's farm economy produced **\$15.6 million in value** in the year 2000, which generated another \$6.6 million in related economic activity within other sectors of the local economy. The Westchester Agricultural District includes 11,896 acres of land, with more proposed to be added every year.

Leading the County's agricultural production are **greenhouse and nursery products** - grown both in fields and under glass. In 1997 it generated \$5.96 million in output value and led the agriculture industry in payroll and multiplier effect through the local economy. The nursery/greenhouse sector is well-developed and produces a highly diverse range of products including Christmas trees, landscape materials, and specialty flowers. It is well-integrated with the local landscape industry and tends to be generally compatible with residential land uses.

**Equine operations** also tend to fit reasonably well with suburban development pressures and have thrived in Westchester. This industry sector is diverse, often informal and complex because it straddles agriculture and recreation. Equestrian activities take the form of boarding, breeding, training, events, trials, trail riding and organized hunts. In 1997 it generated \$3 million in output value according to the New York Agricultural Statistical Services. More significantly, in 2000 Westchester County had \$121 million in equine inventory. This represents an enormous investment in horses – more than 7% of the entire State of New York. Although difficult to measure, horses are understood to be a critical driver of economic activity in Westchester County and the State of New York.

**Fruit and vegetables**, the third most productive sector of Westchester County agriculture, is driven by small operations, often marketed by direct retail



sales. Vegetable farming has experienced steady growth in recent years with a slight increase in the number of operations. (\$.55 million in 1997) Fruit farming, however, is declining in sales. (\$.37 million in 1997) In spite of high market demand for locally produced fruits and vegetable, expansion of these operations is stymied by land fragmentation and high land values.

## Why is agriculture important?

Beyond its economic impact on the County, agricultural land use provides many other unquantifiable benefits to the quality of life of its citizens:

- Direct market and agri-tourism venues provide activities and products to citizens and school groups for whom farming is not a part of their everyday experience.
- Farmed land provides permeable (unpaved) surfaces for rain water to move through and be filtered on its way to the Croton reservoir system and the ground water, both of which provide drinking water to the County and the New York metropolitan area.
- Westchester agriculture provides local - and, therefore, truly fresh - fruits and vegetables, the health benefits of which are becoming more widely appreciated.
- Working landscapes of visual relief from intensely urban settings in the southern part of the County.
- Farms contribute to the attractiveness of many of the towns and, in some cases, help define their character.
- As an alternative to residential and commercial development, it reduces traffic, noise, and air pollution making it an ideal complement to local growth control strategies.

## What is an Agricultural District and Agriculture Board?

Westchester County's Agricultural District was established by the County and certified by the State Department of Agriculture and Markets in 2000. The properties enrolled in the District comprised 11,856 acres in 19 municipalities. They are lands that are farmed or able to be farmed. When farmed, the operation is entitled to protection by the State from local government action that might impede 'sound agricultural practices' and, therefore, its ability to continue agricultural production. An Agricultural District is intended to support agricultural operations and serve as a bridge to the broader community.

## Why adopt an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan?

The Department of Planning and the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board began work on an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan to provide the County with a blueprint for action to improve awareness of the needs of agriculture as an industry and of farmland itself as a valuable component of the County's quality of life. The Plan examines both the land use policies associated with agriculture in Westchester as well as the state of the industry. It analyzes the appropriateness of existing techniques to protect land and support commercial activity. Finally it makes recommendations for action by the towns, the County, and various local agencies. This formalized strategy is a prerequisite for eligibility to apply to the NYS Agriculture and Farmland Protection Program for funds for permanent protection of land with purchase of development rights (PDR), also known conservation easements.

## Want more information?

Visit the Westchester County Department of Planning web site at [www.westchestergov.com/planning](http://www.westchestergov.com/planning) and follow the Environmental Planning link. There you will find links to the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board and other agriculture and environmental resources. You can also call the Planning Department at 995-4400 or visit at Room 432 of the County Offices, 143 Martine Avenue, White Plains.