

Mercer County Farmland Preservation: "Private Land, Public Legacy"

By Dan Pace

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Did you know? In Mercer County, there are nearly 9,000 acres of permanently preserved farmland on over 100 farms? To put that in perspective, only 21%* of the County's 144,640 acres (226 square miles) is farmland but 30% of that farmland is permanently preserved.

*2016 Tax Year - Farmland Assessment



Cherry Grove Farm

No Farms, No Food

30 years ago there were nearly 42,000 farm acres in Mercer County – none of which were preserved. Today there are about 30,000 farm acres but almost 9,000 acres are preserved. 30 years ago there were 13 dairy farms; today there is just one – Cherry Grove Farm in Lawrence. *1987 Census of Agriculture*

The number of entities in Mercer County preserving farmland for future generations is remarkable! They include:

- The County of Mercer
- The State of New Jersey
- Many local governments
- D&R Greenway
- Stony Brook Millstone Watershed Association
- Various "Friends of Open Space" organizations.

Preserving the Family Farm: Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food

IT'S THE LAW:

State Right-To-Farm Act

The Right to Farm Act was passed by the NJ Legislature in 1983. The Act protects responsible commercial farmers from public and private nuisance complaints and unduly restrictive municipal regulations.

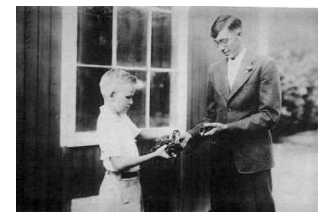
Municipal Ordinances

Echoing the RTF Act, six of Mercer County's 12 municipalities have Right-to-Farm ordinances – they are the townships of Hopewell, Lawrence, West Windsor, East Windsor, Hamilton, and Robbinsville.

Much has been said and written about the excessive carbon footprint of today's grocery store food products and the safety of this extensive food chain. Here in Mercer County, residents are fortunate that many live or work only a short distance away from a farm stand or farm market and can get to know our local farm families. Around the County, are familiar families with preserved farms like the Sciarottas and Niederers (Hopewell), the Mounts (Lawrence) the Lees (East Windsor), the Ellises (Hamilton), and Kalinowski & Keris (W. Windsor), all of whom have family-run farm stands.

What's Happenin' on the Farm!

Preserved farms in Mercer County grow an abundance of fruits and vegetables. Who has not driven down Cold Soil or Van Kirk roads in Lawrence and not enjoyed the view of Terhune's orchards; or, on Yardville-Allentown Road in Hamilton, the hoop-shaped Asian pear trees of Evergreen Farms.



Richard Lee, on left (Lee Turkey Farm)



Mount Family (Terhune Orchards)



Mr. Kim (Evergreen Farm)

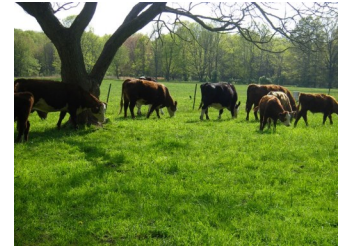
Historically, field crops like soybeans and non-sweet corns reigned on all of Mercer County's farms and even today make up approximately one-third of Mercer County farms' food production.

But many of the County's preserved farms are nursery operations, and in the fall, a ride down Old York Road in Robbinsville will bring in sight David Voorhees Greenhouses' bright mums growing in pots.



Bluestone Farm

At any time of the year, you are likely to drive by one or more permanently preserved farms that breed, train, or rehabilitate horses. You may also drive past herds of cattle on the previously mentioned Cherry Grove farm or on Beech Tree Farm (Hopewell). At these two farms, you can purchase grass-fed beef – and even homemade cheese at Cherry Grove.



Beechtree Farm

From Farm to Table



Windsor Farm

Many of our preserved family farms have roadside stands or farm markets on site. In addition, several preserved farms have pick-your-own operations either throughout the growing season or seasonally for pumpkins in the fall and Christmas trees in the winter. Encouragingly, several area schools are growing student vegetable gardens, and school dining facilities are buying produce and other farm products from local farms.

Agri-Tourism: Hauntings to Tastings

Farmers today often incorporate family entertainment - often referred to a "agri-tourism" - into their marketing plans. In addition to family fun pick-your-own operations, Mercer's preserved-farm owners have utilized varied activities like hayrides, corn mazes, haunted fields, school trips, and festivals. For those so inclined, three preserved vineyards, Working Dog Winery, Hopewell Valley Vineyards and Terhune Orchards, offer wine for sale and tasting.



Kevin & Sharon Kyle



Howell Farm

Mercer County has a rich farming heritage. Residents are fortunate that the County of Mercer owns and supports one of the premier living history farms in the country. The 130-acre Howell Living History Farm in Hopewell Township, adjacent to the 1,100-acre Baldpate Mountain county park, holds many family activities for the general public.

A sampling of preserved farms with markets or agri-tourism as found on the "Jersey Fresh" Website:

Lee Turkey Farm
201 Hickory Corner Rd
East Windsor

Terhune Orchards
330 Cold Soil Rd
Lawrence

Windsor Farm
1202 Windsor Rd
Windsor

McLaughlin Tree Farm
1312 Old York Rd
Robbinsville

Working Dog Winery
Windsor-Perrineville Rd
Robbinsville



Working Dog Winery

Looking Ahead: The Times They are A-Changin’

The number of farm acres in Mercer County has, unfortunately, decreased by about 50% over the past 30 years; however, the number of farms today (272), is only slightly smaller in number than 30 years ago (302)! The reason is that today’s farms are much smaller than yesteryears. The 1977 average size was 139 acres; now it’s 73 acres. New young farmers growing high-value crops (organic vegetables) are farming smaller and more affordable farms.

Another way that farms have changed is in what they are producing. Whereas more than half the farm acres 30 years ago were in traditional field crops, today that number is one-third. This change occurred primarily through increases in equine, vineyard, nursery and fruit/vegetable production.

Finally, as any “old-time” resident can vouch for, suburban residential development has taken over many farm fields over the past 30 years with the remaining farms primarily at the County’s northern and southern boundaries.

Protecting Farming

So what can be done to continue protecting farmland in Mercer County? To date, more than 100 landowners have taken advantage of the economic incentive of farmland preservation programs. But there are more out there that, provided they meet program criteria, can preserve their farmland, creating a public legacy while continuing to privately own their land.

As discussed earlier, these programs are supported by government and non-profit organizations. But non-profits more often than not partner with government to leverage funds and meet the financial costs of preserving private farmland. You – the taxpayer – can tell your local governments to continue preserving farms and you can donate to those non-profit organizations actively preserving farmland. It is important to note that farming is a business and as such, farmers pay taxes to local, state and federal governments.

But even after farmland is preserved and the landowner has realized a financial gain by selling the rights to never develop the land for anything other than agricultural activity, there still remains the matter of maintaining a livelihood through everyday farming activity. Here, you – the consumer – can support agriculture by buying direct from farmers or supporting their agri-tourism activities.

Protecting the Environment

Today’s focus on our fragile environment, and how important that is to all of us, means that it can’t be left unsaid how farmers are excellent stewards of their lands. Although they, like so many others, have to navigate through a 21st-century maze of environmental laws and regulations, they do it. Many have also availed themselves of Federal and State assistance programs that not only provide the financial resources to aid with regulatory compliance but also provide incentives to protect the environment using the latest management techniques.

See You on the Farm!

Visit a farm stand or market today and support these local business people who not only bring you a natural and healthy and often fun product, but also provide you with beautiful vistas along our roads and byways! It’s our quality of life and you can make a difference.

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