

Agriculture and Ledyard

“Agriculturally, the town of Ledyard has been compared to a pumpkin; the best part of it being on the outside. And it is true that the farms upon the out-skirts are, as a rule, more easily tilled than those in the central portion, yet, perhaps, no more productive.”

History of the Town of Ledyard, 1650-1900, 1901, Rev. John Avery

The history of agriculture in Ledyard, like that of much of Connecticut, is embedded in the family farm. What was once the staple of most Ledyard homes, the family farm has all but vanished today. Nevertheless, Ledyard’s agricultural heritage is still represented in both traditional and new forms of development. Maintaining and growing Ledyard’s agricultural base is not only good for the tax base but is paramount to providing valuable open space and scenic vistas, tourism and local economy, jobs, wildlife habitat and public health.

The Agricultural Section of Ledyard’s Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) is mandated by CGS Sec. 8-23(c)(10), which requires that the Planning Commission of each municipality consider the *protection and preservation of agriculture*. In 2008 the Town applied for and received funding to develop an Agricultural Section of its POCD through a State Department of Agriculture Viability Planning Grant.

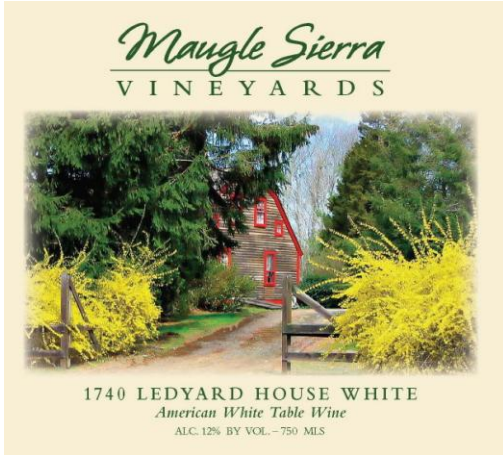
I. Agricultural History

In 1900, Ledyard had 1,218 residents living on 212 farms. Most farms were established to sustain the family, while others were a source of income. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century in Ledyard, peaches were a thriving crop until disease and multiple harsh winters ended this industry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century strawberries were a principal crop. In addition, large dairy and poultry operations existed, as was a thriving timber industry related to shipbuilding.

Today, Ledyard’s large-scale strawberry, poultry and dairy operations have ceased, with the overall number of large farms greatly diminished. According to the University of Connecticut’s Center for Land Use Education and Research between 1985 and 2006 the State lost 1.6% of its agricultural fields, whereas Ledyard saw 10.5% of its agricultural fields perish. Much of this former farmland now contains residential development or has grown fallow.

Large-scale agriculture development in Ledyard has historically been hindered by a lack of prime and important farmland soils. Much of Ledyard’s land is rocky and drains poorly which makes the agricultural use of land all that more difficult.

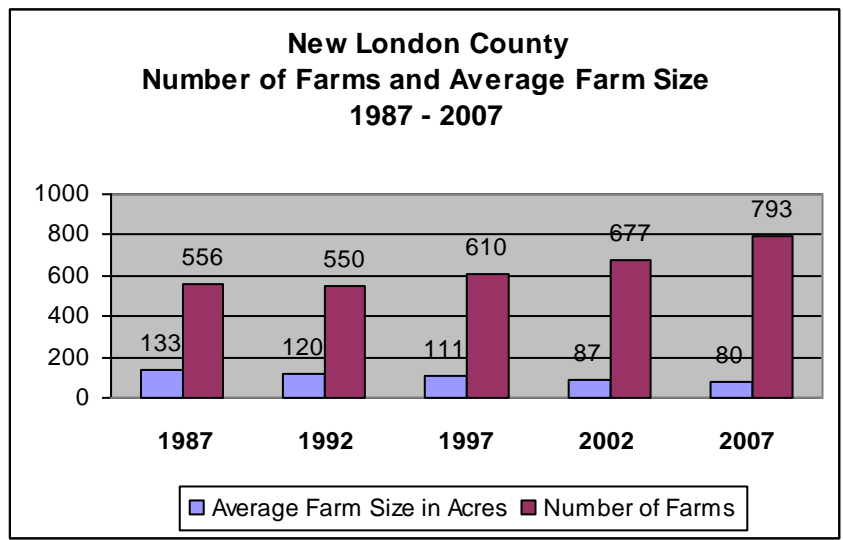
Nevertheless, a number of traditional farms still exist as well as a growing number of niche farming operations as more and more residents choose to invest in their land.



Example #1: In 2002, Paul and Betty Maugle purchased a 97-acre farm on Route 117 and developed it into Maugle Sierra Vineyards – part of Connecticut’s emerging wine industry. Open year round, this facility not only grows and bottles grape wines, but also provides visitors with the opportunity to learn about an agricultural practice and picnic while enjoying the harvest. Customers who visit Maugle Sierra Vineyard also spend their money at local restaurants, lodges and other nearby businesses.

It is no coincidence that niche farms continue to sprout up, as more and more Nutmeggers are choosing to buy locally grown products after more than half a century of consuming mostly processed and non-local foods.

The 2007 Agricultural Census shows that the number of farms in New London County increased sharply between 2002 and 2007. Today, almost 800 farms exist, an increase of 18.5% in just the past five (5) years. At the same time the average size of a New London County farm has decreased from 87 to 80 acres. A 40% reduction in farm size has been experienced in New London County over the past 20 years.



Example #2: Aiki Farms is a five (5) acre “organic-biointensive” vegetable farm established by Bob Burns in 2001 located on Shewville Road. A forerunner of the Department of Agriculture’s farm-to-chef program, Aiki Farms sells their produce to area restaurants and markets, and participates in area farmers markets. Customers are invited to visit the farm, pick your own, sit Zazen (meditate) or practice Aikido (Japanese martial arts).

II. Agricultural Economy

Connecticut agriculture contributes \$2 billion dollars to the State’s economy each year. Consequently, agriculture adds to and is a major component of New London County’s economic diversity. For example, according to the 2007 Agricultural Census, farm production expenses in New London County alone totaled more than \$90 million dollars that year. Many of these dollars were spent locally.

One of Ledyard’s Economic Development goals articulated in its 2003 Plan of Conservation and Development is to “*encourage farm diversification to enable farming to be a viable economic enterprise*”. Agriculture in Ledyard is represented by several sectors.

Town of Ledyard Agriculture Sectors

Christmas Trees	Nursery/Greenhouse
Corn	On-Farm Sales/Pick-your-own/Orchard
Dairy	Organic
Equine	Poultry
Farmers’ Market	Winery/Vineyard
Hay	Wood Production

The relationship of agriculture to the economy in terms of tourism, job creation and maintaining lower property taxes is strong. Farmland offers a fiscal benefit to communities as evidenced by several recent cost-of-community-service (COCS) studies which compared the cost of town services to land use, i.e., residential, commercial or industrial, and farmland or open space.

These studies all show that agriculture pays a disproportionate share in taxes compared to residential development, and is nearly equal to commercial or industrial development in terms of positive tax benefit. On average, for every dollar (\$1.00) collected in municipal taxes for residential development \$1.12 was expended in municipal services, whereas for commercial/industrial and farmland/open space development only \$0.19 and \$0.22 was spent on municipal services respectively.

Cost to Provide Community Services per Dollar of Revenue Raised

Residential	\$1.12
Commercial/Industrial	\$0.19
Farmland/Open Space	\$0.22

*Sources: Cost of Community Services Studies,
Towns of Brooklyn, Lebanon and Windham*

To continue the strength of the regional agricultural economy the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments recommended in its 2004 publication Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Southeastern, CT the formation of a regional subgroup to “*support the retention and strengthening of the regional agricultural base*”. This recommendation has not been implemented.

Ledyard and communities along Connecticut’s southeast coast contain a unique microclimate favorable to fruit crops, including vineyards. With global warming and rising sea temperatures it is believed that the environment for these and other warm climate crops will thrive and make the region more agriculturally viable.

III. Agriculture and the Environment

The environmental benefits to agricultural development are numerous. Most agriculture provides natural limitations on impervious surface coverage compared to other land uses. Consequently, agricultural development provides less potential for pollution run-off, loss of habitat and biodiversity, flooding, erosion and sedimentation, diminished air quality, and global warming.

Local agriculture helps reduce carbon emissions by providing local food and horticultural sources versus a developing dependence on products shipped across regional, state and continental divides. (According to the Food and Drug Administration approximately 50% of all fruits and vegetables are imported from outside the United States). Local agriculture helps provide food security should a natural or manmade disaster occur outside our region.

IV. Agricultural Incentives

Until recently only developers were interested in farmland – not for farming but for non-agricultural development purposes. Governmental incentives or options for farmers looking to preserve their land were few.

An early option for farmers and one hoped to quell the rapid loss of farmland was the establishment of Public Act 490 in 1963. PA 490 requires Connecticut towns to assess farm and forest land on the basis of use rather than development or market value. Consequently, taxes are reduced when compared to developable or open land. If a particular parcel of land is sold for development within 10 years of its classification in Public Act 490, towns receive a conveyance tax from the property owner to recover part of the lost taxes.

In Ledyard 6,366 acres are classified under Public Act 490, which represents 25% of the Town's land area. The majority of this classification (3,947 acres or 62%) is in forestland. The remainder (2,419 acres or 38%) is in cropland, pasture and orchard. The percentage of forestland to other farmland types in Ledyard is higher than that of other New London County communities, some of which have major dairy, poultry or other large-scale agricultural operations.

Another tax reduction assistance program mandated by State Statute is a \$100,000 tax exemption for farm equipment available for farm businesses that spend or make at least \$15,000 annually. In Ledyard 32 farm entities participate in this exemption.

Optional State programs created to assist agricultural businesses that municipalities may adopt include:

1. Up to an additional \$100,000 farm-equipment tax exemption (for a total of \$200,000);
2. Up to a \$100,000 farm-building tax exemption; and,
3. An abatement of up to 50% of property taxes for certain type of farm businesses, i.e., dairy, fruit orchards, vineyards, vegetable farms and nurseries.

To date, Ledyard has not adopted these programs.

Another program established by the legislature in 1978 is the State Department of Agriculture Farmland Preservation Program. This program pays up to 100% of the conservation easement value (or purchase of development rights) for farmland that contains at least 30 active acres. To date, 35,000 acres on 250 farms have been preserved, including three (3) farms totaling 300 acres in Ledyard.

In addition to the State Department of Agriculture, the Department of Environmental Protection manages an Open Space Acquisition Grant Program that pays up to 50% of either the fair market value of development rights or purchase price, whichever is less. The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service manages the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program where state or local governments, or non-profit land trusts provide 25% of the conservation easement value in exchange for receiving 50% funding.

There are also several private non-profit land trusts available to assist farm owners in Ledyard interested in land preservation. Connecticut Farmland Trust for example focuses exclusively on preserving Connecticut's farmland, with staff and funding to meet this goal. The Trust for Public Lands provides technical assistance and funding for land preservation, including farmland. Avalonia Land Conservancy, a local land trust will accept easements from farmers and others interested in land preservation.

Lastly, the Town of Ledyard is in a position to assist farmers and agricultural businesses in a variety of ways. In addition to adopting the optional tax reduction programs enumerated above, the Town owns farmland that can be leased to area farmers. The Town also can set aside funding for farmland preservation and partner with any of the organizations listed above. Finally, the Town can assist residents interested in preserving farms and promote agricultural business by appointing an Agricultural Committee to represent and work directly with this constituency group.

V. Agriculture Today

One of Ledyard's attractions continues to be its open undeveloped spaces which include farmland. The Town is blessed with a variety of agricultural venues each of which contributes to Ledyard's community character, quality of life, local economy and tax base. Agriculture means business.

- Christmas Tree Farms. New London County ranks first in the State in the number of Christmas tree farms according to the 2007 Agricultural Census. These farms contribute to the environment and provide a valuable product to those both within and outside the region. Ledyard contains a number of Christmas tree farms.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSAs provide the public an opportunity to partner with farms to obtain fresh local products. Farmers are guaranteed a certain amount of income and are able to plan according to their customer base. Consumers are provided the added benefits of seeing their food grow, learning about agriculture and interacting with the grower. Connecticut's CSA movement is strong, where the number of consumers outnumbers CSAs taking on new members. Ledyard contains two (2) CSAs, Hidden Brook Gardens and Cedar Meadow Farm.
- Equine. Connecticut boasts 40,000+/- horses --the most per square mile than any other State. Horse owners spend on average more than \$20,000 annually on their horses – much of which is spent locally. There are over 20 properties in Ledyard that contain horses, including several that provide training, lessons, boarding and recreation, and have both indoor and outdoor facilities.



Mystic Valley Hunt Club

- Farmers Market. Ledyard's Tri-Town Farmers Market began in 2008 and provides a local venue for area farmers interested in selling their products. The Market is supported by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture which provides WIC clients with vouchers to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at the Market.
- Ledyard Agricultural Fair. The Agricultural Fair, now in its 63rd year, provides a showcase for local agriculture and runs for 2½ days in early September each year. The Fair has livestock exhibits, horse and oxen pulls, a horse show and other events.

- Nursery and Greenhouse. The nursery and greenhouse industry represents half of all farm sales in Connecticut employing some 48,000 persons. Holdridges is a third generation nursery and greenhouse that operates a large retail facility in the Town Center. Other greenhouses in Ledyard include Alice Acres in Gales Ferry and The Funny Farm on Shewville Road.



Holdridges

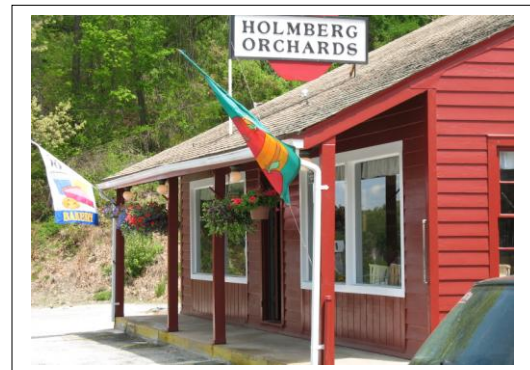
- Orchards, Farm Markets and Pick-Your-Own. There are several orchards, farm markets and pick-your-own operations in Ledyard. Some of these have been in the same family for generations such as Allyn Farm. Most are open seasonally, with the exception of Holmberg Orchards Farm Market located in Gales Ferry which is open year round. These facilities provide an up-close and personal experience for those who wish to walk among the flora and fauna, and pick the fruit off the vine.



The Funny Farm



Alice Acres



Holmberg Orchards

- Vineyards. Ledyard is fortunate to claim one of Connecticut's 28 vineyards (Maugle Sierra Vineyards), which includes a tasting room and wine sales open to the public. This form of agriculture can provide the visitor with a special appreciation for the land and agricultural practices as well as providing a significant boost to the local economy from those who would not come to the community if not for this special venue.

VI. Recommendations

- A. **Regulatory Responsibility.** The following recommendations are regulatory in nature and require legal action by one or more town agencies.

Planning Commission

1. Articulate the Town philosophy regarding agriculture and its future in Ledyard by adopting an Agricultural Section into the Plan of Conservation and Development pursuant to CGS 8-23(c)(10).
2. Define "Open Space" in the Subdivision Regulations as "*Land permanently preserved through deed/conservation restriction left in its natural state and/or reserved for recreation or farming use.*"
3. Mandate cluster or conservation subdivision development. Consider requiring a yield plan versus formula in determining the number of allowable lots in cluster or conservation subdivisions. Include "the preservation of prime and important farmland soils" as a purpose to this section.
4. Create an agricultural buffer requirement for proposed new development that abuts active farmland, i.e., 100 feet. Require language to be placed in each deed for new lots created identifying that adjacency to an active agricultural operation.

Zoning Commission

5. Add under Zoning Section 1.2. Purpose to read: "*To promote existing agricultural uses and protect prime and important farmland soils.*"
6. Include a Purpose and Intent to the residential zoning districts to include the word "agriculture".
7. Create an Agricultural Zone to include properties permanently preserved under the State farmland preservation program.
8. Allow seasonal farm stands by right in front yard.

9. Consider limiting the number of rear lots outside of cluster or conservation subdivisions.
10. Review earth removal regulations to assure that prime and important farmland soils are permanently preserved.
11. Define "Open Space" in the Zoning Regulations as "*Land permanently preserved through deed/conservation restriction left in its natural state and/or reserved for recreation or farming use.*"
12. Consider Transfer of Development Rights to help preserve large tracks of farmland while guiding development to planned growth centers with infrastructure.

Town Council

13. Adopt an additional \$100,000 farm equipment tax exemption for qualifying agricultural businesses as permitted by CGS Sec. 12-91(b).
 14. Adopt the \$100,000 farm building tax exemption for buildings used exclusively in farming as permitted under CGS Sec. 12-91(c).
 15. Adopt up to 50% property tax abatement for certain types of farms as permitted under CGS Sec. 12-81m.
 16. Consider adoption of a right-to-farm ordinance to include the use of best management practices for agricultural operations as a general policy statement to Town boards and commissions and the public at large.
- B. Non-Regulatory. The following recommendations are administrative in nature and do not require legal action. Responsibility for implementation is identified after each recommendation.
1. Establish an Agricultural Committee under the auspices of the Economic Development Commission to take the lead in promoting and preserving Ledyard's agriculture, including the review of existing and proposed ordinances and land use regulations. Town Council.
 2. Establish an agricultural cluster regional subgroup as recommended by the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments in its 2004 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Southeastern, CT. SCCG and SeCTer.
 3. Create outreach letters to farmers and agricultural businesses identifying the above and offering assistance. Agricultural Committee.

4. Hold a land preservation options conference to introduce residents to local, regional and state agricultural decision makers and programs. Agricultural Committee.
5. Conduct a build-out analysis and cost-of-community-services study to identify the impact of the zoning regulations and economic benefits to farmland as a land use. Planning Commission.
6. Establish locally-important farmland soils designation through USDA/NRCS in order better assist those agricultural property owners who desire state and federal dollars. Mayor.
7. Provide long-term leases to town-owned land for farming. Mayor.
8. Adopt the use of mulch hay instead of silt fence when protecting wetlands. Wetlands Commission.
9. Utilize additional Department of Agriculture Viability Planning Grants and town funds to promote agriculture. Agricultural Committee.
10. Conduct resident survey to include willingness to pay for agriculture and open space preservation. Town Council.
11. Set aside funding to assist property owners in preserving land. Mayor, Town Council, Planning Commission and Agricultural Committee.
12. Partner with USDA/NRCS, Connecticut Department of Agriculture, land trusts and others to preserve farmland. Mayor and Town Council.
13. Participate to the greatest extent possible in the Farm-To-School Program coordinated through the Department of Agriculture. Board of Education and Food Service Coordinator.
14. Identify a key municipal official(s) to take lead at Town Hall to help implement these agricultural preservation policies. Mayor.
15. Celebrate agricultural businesses, including the Farmers' Market and local farm products on the Town web site. Mayor.