

# FOOD PRODUCTION

## Project Summary

Tompkins Food Future is a community food system planning initiative to craft the first-ever comprehensive food system plan for Tompkins County. The goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable, affordable, and healthy food system for all members of our community. What follows is an overview of the state of our local food system gleaned from community conversations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, neighborhood canvassing, and data collection. This section covers **Food Production**.

## Land Acknowledgement

Tompkins Food Future, Tompkins County Food Policy Council, and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County acknowledge that we are located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogohó:nq' (the Cayuga Nation). The Gayogohó:nq' are members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an alliance of six sovereign nations with a historic and contemporary presence on this land. The confederacy precedes the establishment of Cooperative Extension, Cornell University, New York State and the United States of America. We acknowledge the painful history of Gayogohó:nq' dispossession, and honor the ongoing connection of Gayogohó:nq' people, past and present, to these lands and waters. We aim to ensure that the future of Tompkins County's food system addresses past injustices and builds greater food sovereignty among Indigenous people.

## Introduction

The people who plant, grow, raise, and harvest the food we eat are at the heart of our local food system. Farmers work in relationship with the land and environment to provide the foundation of food for our community. Where our food comes from and how it is produced are key pieces of the food system. In this section, we explore who farms and grows our food, how it is produced, and the type and quantity of food produced in our region. We also look at the environmental impacts and benefits of our agricultural system, and discuss the increasingly severe impacts from climate change. We spoke with farmers and producers about their biggest challenges, and we asked what is needed to create strong and sustainable businesses for the long-term.

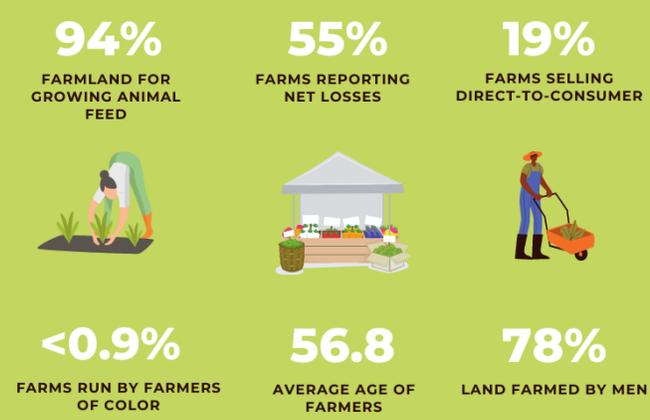
*To access the full content of the Food Production baseline - a living document with room for ongoing community input and updates - please visit [www.tompkinsfoodfuture.org/food-system-plan](http://www.tompkinsfoodfuture.org/food-system-plan)*

# TOMPKINS COUNTY AGRICULTURE AT-A-GLANCE

Farmers work in relationship with the land and environment to provide the foundation of food for our community.



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## Challenges

**Workforce:** A shortage of interested, trained, local employees. Farm labor is the biggest annual expense for local farms and critical for their viability.

**Transitions:** Transitions occur when ownership or land tenure changes or when an owner/operator decides to change their enterprise to new crops, new technology, or between conventional and organic techniques. Barriers to transitioning farms include skill building requirements, financial risk, and a profitability lag. It can be difficult to find new farmers with the financial capacity and skills to take over mature farms ready for new ownership. Young and minority farmers face additional barriers to finding capital and supportive networks.

**Profitability:** Limited access to retailers, distributors, and processors (e.g., slaughterhouses, canners, frozen food markets), and high costs of production (e.g., land, labor, insurance, regulatory costs) make it difficult to run a profitable agricultural business. Supplemental, “off-farm,” income is needed for most farm families to survive, and without existing wealth new farmers struggle to get off the ground.

**Scale and Markets:** Marketing was the biggest challenge identified by small farmers, who described it as an uphill battle in need of constant attention. Many small farms in Tompkins County do not have the capacity to supply at the scale needed to join wholesale

distribution chains, have difficulty finding retail operations that will buy directly from them, and are frustrated by the time and skills required to provide customer service for direct-to-consumer sales.

**Regulatory Burden:** Rules and regulations are one-size fits all and layered through multiple municipalities, impacting modes of production and product standards at the point of sale. This impedes value-added opportunities, innovation, and access to new and diverse markets.

**Business Support:** Access to accountants, lawyers, insurance, and business / marketing support is limited, inconsistent, unreliable, and an additional cost for farmers, who are expected to operate modern businesses and juggle many competing priorities.

**Land access:** Due to systemic racism, increasing land prices, and development pressures, inequities for new and prospective farmers are practically insurmountable, especially BIPOC individuals and those without existing wealth. A high percentage of new and beginning farmers rent land, making long-term investment difficult and limiting their choice of agricultural products to cultivate or raise. The early years are the hardest and while some loans are available, they do not cover the costs of production in Tompkins County.

**Climate change:** Increased drought, erratic rainfall, late and early frosts, and the emergence of new pests have substantially increased time and resources needed to mitigate and adapt to extreme weather conditions.

**Market Disruption from COVID-19:** In 2020, farms experienced declining sales to restaurants, retailers, and distributors, while CSA and direct-to-consumer sales surged and then waned in 2021.

**Community gardening:** Residential and community gardens increase access to fresh produce, exercise, nature, and other people, and so have many benefits. However, community gardens depend on volunteers, have limited funding, and see fluctuating levels of use. Opportunities are limited for those who rent, are low-income, or have limited time. Even large gardens do not produce the majority of calories consumed by a typical household.

## Opportunities

**Financial incentives and transition support** for retiring and beginning farmers would keep agricultural land productive. Facilitated transition support would increase equitable access to agricultural land for the next generation of farmers.

**Education, training, and mentorship program expansion** would prepare and support beginning farmers and expand access to the industry.

**Financial investment in small farmers** who wish to expand would increase capacity in our local food system, feed more of the local population freshly harvested, nutrient dense crops, and potentially lower prices. Fencing, irrigation, greenhouses, and other capital improvements expand our overall capacity as well as that of an individual farm.

**Climate impact education** would help farmers prepare, plan, and maintain resiliency in the face of rapid shifts in weather, pests, and disease.

**Climate mitigation funds** would help farmers invest in infrastructure to control irrigation, protect from frost damage, extend season capabilities, and avoid crop losses.

**Payments for ecosystem services** would increase the carbon carrying and water retention capacity of our cultivated areas.

**Collective infrastructure** such as a grower's cooperative would help farmers position themselves for growth by helping with marketing, strategic business planning, and other business services. A collective can also identify opportunities for new products and promote local purchasing.

**Food systems education** expansion for children and area residents would increase consumer support and build a stronger coalition of future farmers.