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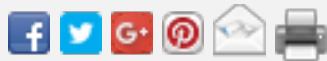
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Agriculture in Georgia: Overview

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Last edited by NGE Staff on 06/06/2017





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Georgia's agricultural industry plays a major role in the state's economy, contributing billions of dollars annually. In 2014 Georgia produced more than the nation's production of broilers (young chickens weighing two and a half pounds), [blueberries](#), [peanuts](#), and [pecans](#). Georgia ranked second in production of [cotton](#), third in production of [peaches](#) and tomatoes, and sixth in tobacco acreage.

The food and fiber sector is very diversified and includes the production and processing of a wide range of commodities. Georgia has over 10 million acres of land devoted to farms, with an average farm size of 100 acres. In 2012 Georgia's farmers sold more than \$9.2 billion worth of agricultural products. Of the more than 42,000 individual Georgia farms in 2012, more than 17,000 raised beef or [dairy](#) cows, while 10,000 grew cotton.



Peanut Harvest

The [poultry](#) and egg industry accounted for 47 percent of commodities, producing more than 6 billion pounds of broilers and more than 5 billion eggs. Approximately 40 percent of the nation's pecans were produced in Georgia. Other crops produced include [apples](#), [berries](#), cabbage, [corn](#), cotton and cottonseed, cucumbers, [grapes](#), hay, oats, [onions](#), peaches, rye, sorghum, [soybeans](#), tobacco, tomatoes, [vegetables](#), [watermelons](#), and well as ornamentals, turf grass, and other nursery and greenhouse commodities. Crops accounted for \$4.5 billion in cash receipts.

Livestock cash receipts totaled \$5.3 billion in 2012.

Beef cattle, dairy cows, and [hogs](#) are produced on farms throughout the state. Miscellaneous livestock such as meat [goats](#) and [sheep](#), catfish, trout

(aquaculture), and honeybees are also produced.



Dairy Cows

Statistics on Georgia's agriculture are reported annually by the Georgia Agricultural Statistics Service, which organizes data by commodity, and the *Georgia Farm Gate Value Report*. The Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, the report is drawn from information reported by Georgia's County Extension Service county agents.

Extension Service county agents.

Early History

Agriculture has played a dominant role in Georgia's economy for more than two and a half centuries



Pumpkin Farm

beginning with the settlement by English colonists, led by [E. Oglethorpe](#), in [Savannah](#) in 1733. One of the major goals of the colonists was to produce agricultural commodities for export. To achieve this objective, Oglethorpe sought the advice and assistance of [Tomochichi](#), leader of the Yamacraw tribe. The Indians were skilled in hunting and fishing, and especially in the cultivation of native crops such as beans, pumpkins, melons, and fruits of several kinds. The colonists learned agricultural practices from the Native Americans, and their collaboration was profitable from the very beginning. The

colonists produced enough corn the first year to export some 1,000 bushels to England. They also began establishing



Broilers

enterprises that would produce silk, [indigo](#), and wine, which were especially in demand. In 1735 Queen Caroline of England wore a dress made of imported Georgia silk to celebrate her birthday. By 1742 Georgia silk had become an important export commodity, and by 1767 silk was exported to England each year. [Rice](#) and indigo also became profitable crops during the years of the colony.

The Trustees of the colony established an experimental garden of ten acres in Savannah and employed a botanist to collect seeds, drugs, and dyestuff from other countries with a similar climate, and to conduct research on how they could be grown in Georgia. This was the first agricultural experiment station in America, and many new crops, including cotton, were introduced. The [Trustee Garden](#) was laid out near Savannah with crosswalks bordered by rows of orange trees. The experimental plots were filled with mulberry trees and plants of many different varieties from many lands. The botanist, Hugh Anderson, reported in 1740, "There is a ten acre garden of orange, mulberry trees, vines, some olives which thrive well, and peaches, and it may be confessed that oranges have not so universally thriven with us by reason of several blasts in the spring." The mulberry trees provided a food source for silkworms. Other plants in the garden included figs, vines, pomegranates, coffee, cotton, several West Indian plants, and a plant called cane from the East Indies.



[Corn](#)

"King Cotton"



[Slave Women in Cotton Field](#)

Cotton and tobacco were the major crops in Georgia after the American Revolution (1775-83), and cotton soon became the dominant crop grown. The invention of the [cotton gin](#) by [Eli Whitney](#) in 1793 revolutionized the cotton industry. Whitney was visiting a friend near Savannah when he revolutionized the cotton gin. By 1860 there were 68,000 farms in the state, and they produced 1.5 million bales of cotton. Only 3,500 farms had 500 acres or more, and most had fewer than 100 acres of land. After the [Civil War](#) (1861-65) ended, cotton continued to be the main crop in many parts of Georgia. In 1860, more than 725,000 bales of cotton were produced.

Growing cotton almost exclusively proved to have ravaging effects on the soil. Agricultural leaders in the mid-1800s extolled the virtues of diversifying Georgia's agriculture and recommended that greater emphasis be placed on livestock, poultry, orchards, vineyards, vegetables, forage, and forestry.

Still, cotton was such an attractive cash crop that it dominated agriculture not only in Georgia but throughout the South for many decades.

In 1915, however, the [boll weevil](#) spread into southwest Georgia, destroying thousands of acres of cotton. That pest, combined with a very low price for cotton after [World War I](#) (1917-18), made diversification imperative. Moreover, outdated and damaging farming practices, such as plowing furrows without respect to the land's contour and intertilling (planting short crops beneath tall crops, which increases productivity but depletes the soil) resulted in topsoil erosion by the 1920s. Cotton production fell from a high of more than 5 million acres and 2,769,000 bales in 1911 to only about 500,000 acres and 1,350,000 bales in 2000. In 2000, 1,350,000 acres of cotton were harvested, with a total of 1,663,000 bales produced and total receipts of \$411,025,000. Cotton is no longer "king" in Georgia, but cotton sales still accounted for more than 18 percent of the total cash receipts for agricultural production in 2012.



Cotton B

Farm Population

Georgia remained an agrarian state until after [World War II](#) (1941-45). The rural population decreased much between 1920, when there were 2.1 million rural people and 310,000 farms, and 1960, when there were still 1.98 million rural residents. The proportion of the population living in rural areas decreased from about 85 percent in 1900 to 37 percent by 1990.

Multiple factors contributed to the decrease in Georgia's rural population. First, the [Great Depression](#) and U.S. president [Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal](#) programs disrupted the [sharecropping](#) system, which was a large part of Georgia's agricultural economy at the turn of the twentieth century. The [Agricultural Adjustment Act](#), for example, paid landowners not to plant certain crops, which reduced landowners' need for sharecroppers and increased their ability to buy labor-saving machinery. The rural population also decreased as factories and urban centers expanded at a rapid pace during the war and as war veterans attended college on the GI Bill. These graduates either explored non-farm careers or embraced modern, industrialized agriculture with large mechanized farms.



Vidalia O

As of 2012 only about 45,000 farms remained in Georgia, and less than 15 percent of Georgians worked in agriculture or forestry. Slightly more than 9.6 million acres are classified as farmland, with an average farm size of 228 acres. Nearly half of all Georgia farms made less than \$2,500 in 2012, while 10 percent made more than \$100,000.

Although the number of farms in Georgia continues to decrease—from about 47,000 in 2012—farms are growing in size. Average farm acreage in the state increased by 7 percent and 2012.



Roadside Produce Stand

The economic impact of the food, fiber, and related industries is estimated in 2011 at more than \$71 billion (or about 9 percent of the state's total economic output of \$764 billion). That includes about \$60 billion in processing value. Agriculture supports about 75,000 jobs in the state, and Georgia is home to more cropland, 24.4 million acres, than any other state.

Although the service sector has surpassed agriculture in number of employees since the end of the twentieth century, farm production continues to be a central part of Georgia's economy and way of life.

Further Reading

Cite This Article

More from the Web

David S. Abbe and Christina S. Messer, *Georgia Agricultural Facts* (Athens: Georgia Department of Agriculture, Georgia Agricultural Statistics Service, annual).

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