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Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County celebrates 100 years

by [Rachel Siford](#) |
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What started as an agricultural agency in 1917 has grown to encompass that and much more. The Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, based in Riverhead, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

A hundred years ago, Long Island had over 100,000 acres of farmland, dedicated primarily to potato growing. Now, there are approximately 30,000 to 35,000 acres of active farmland producing a variety of crops and flowers. With the evolution of the farming industry, CCE has transformed quite a bit as well.

“Tremendous evolution has occurred to the Cooperative Extension over the years,” said executive director Vito Minei. “Even in the last ten years, with technology in marine science, agricultural science, in the way we approach nutrition education and also dealing with youth programs, everything is changing very quickly and I’m extremely proud of the people who do the work here.”

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 established land grant colleges in each state to educate farmers, but it was decided in 1914 that extensions were necessary to reach more people. Thus, the Suffolk County extension was born, and has been helping farms on Long Island’s East End ever since. For example, 70 percent of Suffolk County’s fruit tree growers seek assistance from CCE in controlling insects and, as a result, their average number of pesticide applications has dropped from five per season to 1.5, according to the extension.

“I don’t think I’d be around if it weren’t for Cornell,” said Jack Van de Wetering, owner of Ivy Acres in Calverton. “They’ve done amazing things for my company.”

Mr. Van de Wetering remembers when CCE developed a new soil in the 1960s that allowed him to grow without weeds and produce more efficiently. He relies on CCE to keep him informed about pests and problems that affect Long Island farmers. Today, Ivy Acres supplies Home Depot with flowers and serves 150 stores daily with its greenhouse products.

“Another thing that has changed dramatically over the 100 years in agriculture is the ability to provide information very quickly,” Mr. Minei explained. “We’re proud to have agriculture researchers here on Long Island in these conditions, so farmers don’t have to call the campus in Ithaca, where the conditions are different, to ask about problems they are encountering.”

Although most Suffolk farms are on the East End, landscaping, horticultural and greenhouse businesses operate countywide.

“There’s agriculture all over New York, that’s true,” Mr. Minei said. “But there’s nothing close to the agriculture around here. I don’t think there are two or three counties combined that come close to the amount of flowers grown in Suffolk County. My point is how diverse agriculture is in Suffolk.”

Harbes Family Farm has been on Long Island for 13 generations. CCE has helped transform the farm from a wholesaler into a Long Island attraction, using agritourism to spark visitors’ interest in farming.

“As part of their involvement to help me grow the best possible fruit, we also like to open the farm to the public to allow families to come in as farm guests to participate in the annual harvest,” Edward Harbes said. “I hold [CCE] in the highest regard. They’re instrumental in helping me forge my own life on the farm and bring a higher degree of sophistication to have their resources than I would have by myself.”

CCE of Suffolk County now runs numerous programs, including agriculture and horticulture, family health and wellness, the 4-H Youth Development, marine and nutritional programs and the Suffolk County Farm in Yaphank, which attracted 50,000 visitors last year.

The 4-H program is promoting science, technology, engineering and math for school-aged children, in an effort to keep youth here in Suffolk County. It also aims at getting young girls interested in STEM and has started a mentorship program with Cornell that tries to encourage young girls to explore careers in science and engineering.

“They keep talking about how the rejuvenation and development of Suffolk’s economy will be in high-tech industries,” Mr. Minei said. “The concern of the businesses that want to relocate here is ‘Will we have technologically-trained youth to fill these jobs?’ so we try to do that through STEM.”

CCE’s Marine Sciences Program, developed in 1985, is responsible for bringing back Peconic Bay scallops. The extension also launched Eat Smart New York to help people with limited resources choose healthier food options. CCE also reported reaching 69,000 individuals in 2015 through its parallel SNAP-Ed program, aimed at improving nutrition on Long Island.

Also, due to increases in the number of grandparents who are primary caregivers for their grandchildren, CCE launched PASTA, or Parenting a Second Time Around, in 2013 to help with issues that grandparents may not be able to relate to, like technology and changing trends.

CCE dedicates considerable resources to its Long Island Pesticide Pollution Prevention Strategy, aimed at discouraging use of harmful pesticides that can damage drinking water. It has introduced biological controls, mating disruption techniques and scouting, which helps farmers determine if chemicals are needed to fix a pest problem.

“The goal in 1917 was to help farmers remain sustainable,” Mr. Minei said. “That goal remains the same, but how you do it changed dramatically. The costs to farmers have dropped and protection of drinking water has become enhanced.”

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Photo: Jack Van de Wetering, owner of Ivy Acres in Calverton, credits Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County for helping his business. (Credit: Rachel Siford)