



Georgia Farm & Food Initiative

DATA BRIEF · GEORGIA FOOD FOR GEORGIA FAMILIES

Georgia Food for Georgia Families: Data Brief

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Georgia farms sold \$313 million of food into local and regional markets in 2022, just 2.4% of the state's \$13.2 billion in farm sales (2.7% of food sales alone). [\[24\]](#) Fruit and vegetable farms hire more workers than all of Georgia's row and field crop farms combined, on less than a fifth of the land, yet Georgia lost 14% of its vegetable farms from 2017 to 2022. [\[24\]](#) With farm bankruptcies rising and export crops losing money [\[14\]](#) [\[16\]](#), growing local markets helps keep farms, jobs, and food dollars in Georgia.

Bracketed numbers link to sources, listed in full at the end.

Why it matters now

- **Bankruptcies are rising.** Georgia farms filed 27 Chapter 12 bankruptcies in 2025, up from 11 in 2024, the second-most of any state. [\[14\]](#)
- **Row crops are losing money.** Georgia farmers lost nearly \$800 million in 2025, and expenses have topped revenues in 7 of the last 11 years. [\[15\]](#) UGA expects cotton and peanut returns to stay negative in 2026. [\[16\]](#)
- **Export crops are exposed.** About 85% of U.S. cotton is exported [\[17\]](#), and UGA warns that retaliatory tariffs threaten Georgia poultry, cotton, and feed. [\[16\]](#)
- **Local markets spread risk.** Farms selling to Georgia grocers, schools, restaurants, and families depend less on trade and global prices. USDA found that farms selling directly to consumers were more likely to stay in business. [\[7\]](#)

At a glance: Georgia's local and regional food sector

Local food sales grew 22% in five years, but total farm sales grew faster, so the local share fell. Farms selling to local grocers, institutions, and food hubs more than doubled. [\[24\]](#)

Measure (USDA Census of Agriculture, Georgia)	2017	2022	Change
All Georgia farms	42,439	39,264	−7%
Total Georgia farm sales	\$9.57 billion	\$13.24 billion	+38%
Farms selling directly to consumers	2,504	2,186	−13%
Direct-to-consumer food sales	\$36.5 million	\$46.4 million	+27%
Farms selling to local retail, institutions, and food hubs	472	1,035	+119%
Sales to local retail, institutions, and food hubs	\$219.1 million	\$266.5 million	+22%
Total local and regional food sales	\$255.6 million	\$312.9 million	+22%
Local share of all farm sales	2.7%	2.4%	−0.3 points
Local share of food sales only	3.0%	2.7%	−0.3 points

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, Georgia [\[24\]](#) [\[1\]](#), compiled in Emory's analysis [\[25\]](#). Dollar figures throughout are not adjusted for inflation.

Food sales leave out cotton, tobacco, nursery and greenhouse plants, sod, Christmas trees and horses (\$1.70 billion in 2022, \$1.17 billion in 2017). Feed crops such as hay and corn stay in. [\[24\]](#)

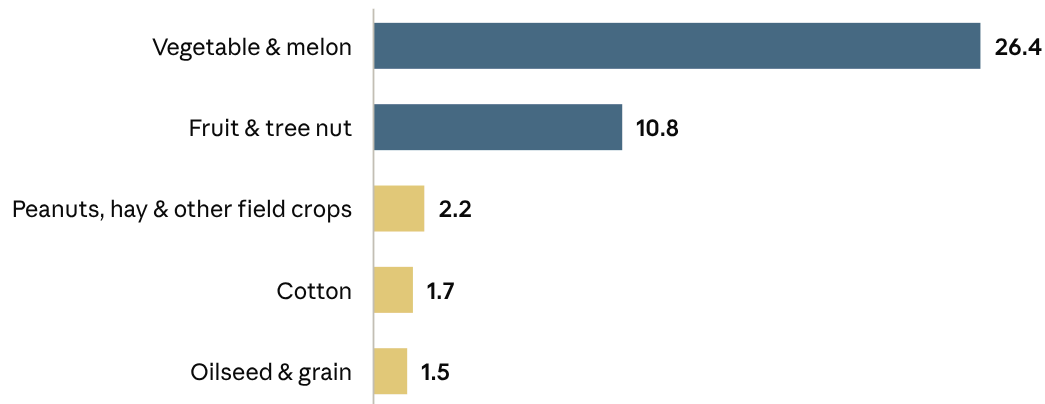
Fruit and vegetable farms: more jobs and value per acre

Georgia's fruit and vegetable farms employ more hired workers than all of the state's row and field crop farms combined, on less than a fifth of the land. [\[24\]](#)

Fruit and vegetable farms hire far more workers per acre

Hired workers per 1,000 acres operated, Georgia farms by main product, 2022

Fruit & vegetable farms overall: 14.5 vs. 2.0 for row & field crop farms (about 7x)



Blue: fruit and vegetable farms. Gold: row and field crop farms. Hired workers include seasonal workers.

USDA NASS 2022 Census of Agriculture, Georgia, farms by NAICS classification [24]; Emory analysis [25]

Georgia farms by main product, 2022	Fruit & vegetable farms	Row & field crop farms
Farms	5,099	13,046
Hired workers	14,986	11,738
Acres operated	1.03 million	5.85 million
Hired workers per 1,000 acres	14.5	2.0
Hired-labor payroll per acre	\$188	\$34
Sales per acre	\$1,075	\$468

Per acre, fruit and vegetable farms have about 7 times the hired workers, 5.5 times the payroll, and 2.3 times the sales. Row and field crop farms are grain and oilseed, cotton, and peanut, hay, tobacco, and other field crop farms. Fruit farms include pecan orchards, so the comparison is conservative. [24] [25]

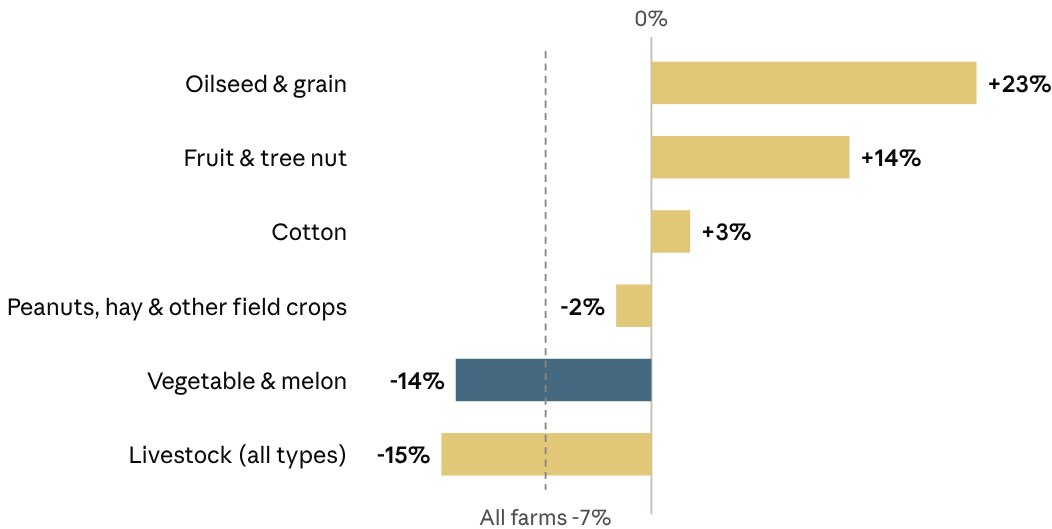
Local sales add jobs. Nationally, fruit and vegetable farms selling into local markets employed 13 full-time workers per \$1 million in sales, versus 3 for similar farms that did not. [6] At that rate, Georgia’s \$313 million in local sales would support roughly 4,100 jobs. The ratio comes from 2008 national data, so treat it as an order of magnitude, not a count. Across all Georgia farms, 44,537 hired workers earned \$691 million in 2022 [24], and the food and fiber sector supports more than 323,300 jobs. [26]

Vegetable farms are disappearing

Georgia lost 14% of its vegetable farms between 2017 and 2022, twice the rate for all farms, while most crop farm types held steady or grew. [\[24\]](#)

Vegetable farms fell 14% while most crop farm types held steady or grew

Change in number of Georgia farms by main product, 2017 to 2022



Farms classified by main product (NAICS). Dashed line: change for all Georgia farms.

USDA NASS 2017 and 2022 Census of Agriculture, Georgia, farms by NAICS classification [\[24\]](#); Emory analysis [\[25\]](#)

- **Small farms hit hardest.** Vegetable farms under 50 acres fell 17%, from 829 to 684. They are still 62% of Georgia’s vegetable farms. [\[24\]](#)
- **Fewer, larger farms.** Vegetable sales still rose, from \$566 million to \$681 million, so production is concentrating. [\[24\]](#)
- **Fruit is a bright spot.** Berry sales more than doubled, from \$98 million to \$216 million, and berry farms grew from 1,030 to 1,396. [\[24\]](#)

How Georgia compares with its neighbors

Georgia is holding on to its farms better than its neighbors, but North and South Carolina have a larger share of farms selling directly to consumers.

State (2022 Census of Agriculture)	Farms	Change in farms since 2017	Farm sales	Farms selling directly to consumers	Source
North Carolina	42,817	-8%	\$18.7 billion	9%	[20]

State (2022 Census of Agriculture)	Farms	Change in farms since 2017	Farm sales	Farms selling directly to consumers	Source
South Carolina	22,633	-9%	\$4.4 billion	8%	[19]
Georgia	39,264	-7%	\$13.2 billion	6%	[2]
Alabama	37,362	-8%	\$9.0 billion	5%	[18]
Tennessee	63,105	-10%	\$5.2 billion	5%	[21]
Kentucky	69,425	-9%	\$8.0 billion	4%	[22]

- **A large local base.** Georgia's \$313 million in local and regional sales is about 3.5 times Tennessee's \$88 million. [\[23\]](#)
- **Room for more farms.** If Georgia matched North Carolina's 9% share, about 1,300 more Georgia farms would sell directly to consumers. [\[2\]](#) [\[20\]](#)

Rural communities: farms that stay, food that stays

- **Local channels grow as farms close.** Georgia lost 3,175 farms from 2017 to 2022, but farms selling to local retailers, institutions, and food hubs more than doubled (472 to 1,035). Farms selling directly to consumers fell 13%. [\[24\]](#)
- **Agritourism brings visitors.** 742 Georgia farms earned \$31.1 million from agritourism and recreation in 2022. [\[4\]](#)
- **Families need fresh food.** 14.6% of Georgia households were food insecure in 2022–2024, above the U.S. rate of 13.3%. [\[8\]](#) Food banks, schools, and SNAP matching at markets can bring local food to them.
- **Demand outpaces supply.** UGA estimated that Georgians eat \$780 million more fruits and vegetables a year than Georgia farms supply them. The estimate uses 2007 data, so it shows scale, not today's gap. [\[27\]](#)
- **What we heard.** Farmers in Southwest Georgia and in Savannah and Coastal Georgia said missing regional storage, processing, and distribution keeps rural food from nearby buyers. [\[13\]](#)

Note: USDA cautions that local economic multipliers for local food vary widely by study, so this brief avoids a single multiplier. [\[7\]](#)

Room to grow

If local and regional sales reached 5% of Georgia's farm sales, about double today's share, they would be worth roughly \$660 million a year.

Scenario (2022 farm sales base of \$13.24 billion)	Local and regional sales	Added vs. today	Illustrative jobs ²
Today (2.4%)	\$313 million	—	~4,100
5% of farm sales	\$662 million	+\$349 million	~8,600
10% of farm sales	\$1.32 billion	+\$1.01 billion	~17,200

² Uses USDA's 13 full-time workers per \$1 million for local-market fruit and vegetable farms [6], applied to the 2022 farm sales base [1]. An order of magnitude, not a forecast.

Other states built this sector with public money. Michigan [9] and Vermont [10] pay schools to buy in-state food. Illinois [11] and Massachusetts [12] fund local processing and distribution. Georgia already has the Georgia Grown brand, Georgia Grown Farm to School, and the Georgia Farmland Conservation Fund to build on.

What legislators can do

Farmers and food leaders in four regional listening sessions said the main barriers to growing more fruits and vegetables are reliable buyers, regional infrastructure, and the capital and know-how to switch. [13] Seven steps would help:

1. **Buy Georgia-grown for schools and state institutions.** Reimburse schools and state agencies for Georgia-grown purchases, on the Michigan and Vermont models, and pilot aggregation that helps farms meet buyer specifications. [9] [10]
2. **Build the missing middle.** Fund regional cold storage, aggregation, processing, and distribution, on the Illinois and Massachusetts models, reusing existing buildings and supporting farmer-owned models. [11] [12]
3. **Help row-crop farms diversify.** Offer transition support, equipment cost-share, crop insurance that works for diversified farms, and on-farm pilots with UGA and Fort Valley State.
4. **Lower the cost of entry.** Share the cost of GAP food-safety certification, connect farmers to community lenders, and prioritize local-market growers in Specialty Crop Block Grants.

5. **Grow the next generation.** Support beginning-farmer incubators, agricultural career pathways, land-link programs, and fair, safe conditions for farmworkers.
6. **Coordinate supply.** Expand Georgia Grown beyond marketing with regional branding, a farmer-and-buyer directory, and a Specialty Crop & Organic Advisory Council.
7. **Fund the data.** Support a Georgia count of jobs and sales on local-market farms, so future decisions rest on Georgia numbers.

Sources

Bracketed numbers in the text link directly to these sources.

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15. J. Stone, [Georgia farmers facing tough times and tough decisions](#), Georgia Farm Bureau News (June 2026), citing UGA Extension's 2026 Crop Budget Tool.
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22. USDA NASS, [2022 Census of Agriculture, Kentucky State Profile](#).
23. R. Holland, M. Leffew, and T. Dugger, [2022 Census of Agriculture Data Sheds Light on Value-Added Agriculture and Specialty Crop Production in Tennessee](#), UT Center for Profitable Agriculture (June 2024).
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25. Emory University FACES Research Group, *GA website analysis* (R Markdown notebook, October 2026), reproducing every Census figure in this brief from the Quick Stats exports in source 24. Farm types follow NAICS: fruit & vegetable = 1112 and 1113; row & field crop = 1111, 11192, and 11193/11194/11199. Available on request.
26. S. P. Kane, [Ag Snapshots 2024: A brief focus on Georgia's agricultural industry](#), UGA Center for Agribusiness & Economic Development (2024; 2022 data).
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