

April 2023

# GROWN IN PUTNAM

## G. O. A. T.

### Good Ol' Agriculture Types



A Special Advertising Publication Of

## PALATKA DAILY NEWS



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Photos by SARAH CAVACINI/Palatka Daily News

ABOVE: Leroy the goat takes his time cutting the grass at Crescent City Junior-Senior High School  
COVER: Waylon the goat munches on a branch and cleans up the fields at Crescent City Junior-Senior High School.

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# THE FUTURE OF FARMING

## PUTNAM COUNTY STUDENTS EMBRACE AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS ACROSS SCHOOLS

By Sarah Cavacini

PALATKA DAILY NEWS

*scavacini@palatkadailynews.com*

The sound of goats bleating and chickens squawking might not be something people hear on every high school campus, but those noises aren't strange at Putnam County schools.

Each junior-senior high school campus in the district has a Future Farmers of America chapter and offers classes in agriculture.

Some students take their skills to the Putnam County Fair every year in March where they show swine, heifer, steer, goats and poultry.

"I know from personal experience, having been a student in an agriculture program myself – as well as a 4-H and FFA member – that it helped shape me into the person I am today," stated Hollie Knowlton, who teaches high school agriculture courses at Interlachen Junior-Senior High School.

Each of the schools are a little different. Interlachen students work in a shop, work with a koi fish pond and a swine barn, as a few examples of the class curriculum.

Students who go to Q.I. Roberts Junior-Senior High School not only learn about farming and animals, but they can learn tractor driving – once they get their driver's license, of course. At least one Palatka Junior-Senior High School student is raising 100 tilapia in the school's aquaculture system. Finally, at Crescent City Junior-Senior High School, teacher Madison Sipprell and her students are working on expanding the program, hoping to add more plants to their greenhouse so they can open a market to sell what they grow, she said.

### Crescent City

Out in Crescent City, goats Waylon and Leroy follow the agriculture students around and help out by eating grass, tending to the greenhouse weeds or keeping the students entertained.

Sipprell, who became the school's agriculture

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TOP: Crescent City Junior-Senior High School agriculture teacher Madison Sipprell shows off the program's greenhouse. Left: Waylon the goat walks around Crescent City Junior-Senior High School helping keep the weeds clear. Right: Two heifers at the Crescent City part of the agricultural program.

Sarah Cavacini/Palatka Daily News



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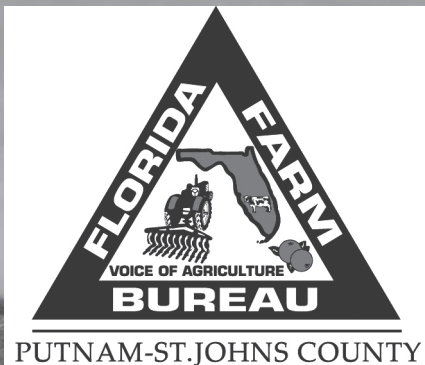
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teacher in October, said the goats belong to a student but they also have a baby goat that she owns, two heifers, hens and a rooster.

She said some students dropped the agriculture program when they lost the last teacher, but knows some will come back and hopes to add more to Crescent City's agriculture program next school year.

The new agriculture teacher grew up in Florahome on a cattle farm, worked at the University of Florida as a veterinarian technician and then was a substitute teacher in the county before taking on this role.

Her class, Sipprell said, is not only for students who want to go to college. Students can take what they learn and further their education in agricultural college classes but they can also take their knowledge and go right into a career, she added. She is also working to make it easier for Crescent City students to obtain agriculture

certifications to add to their resumes.

"My class is for the working kid who wants to do (career and technical education jobs), who wants to do career-oriented stuff," Sipprell said.

The teacher said she has a lot of ideas but coming into a new class mid-year means she needs time to get things worked out. The class already has hens laying eggs and they have started growing vegetables such as Brussel sprouts, garlic and tomatoes.

## Interlachen

Goals for Interlachen's agricultural students include obtaining industry certificates, shaping them to be great leaders and improving them as people overall, Knowlton said.

Students learn from a classroom, but a shop, swine barn, rabbit pens, cattle pasture, coy fish pond and a greenhouse and garden area, she said.

"Students are able to not only



Photos courtesy of Sydney Whitehurst

ABOVE: The Palatka Junior-Senior High School FFA chapters smile together.

RIGHT: Palatka Junior-Senior student Wyatt Tillis shows off a crawfish that's part of the school's aquaculture system.

cultivate their minds in the classroom, but they also can apply that technical knowledge through hands-on learning at the agricultural land lab," Knowlton stated.

Not only does the school have a variety of agriculture classes, but there is also an FFA chapter. One student, Lillian Dockery, is working to receive her state FFA degree this year, Knowlton said, which is the second-highest degree FFA can give a member.

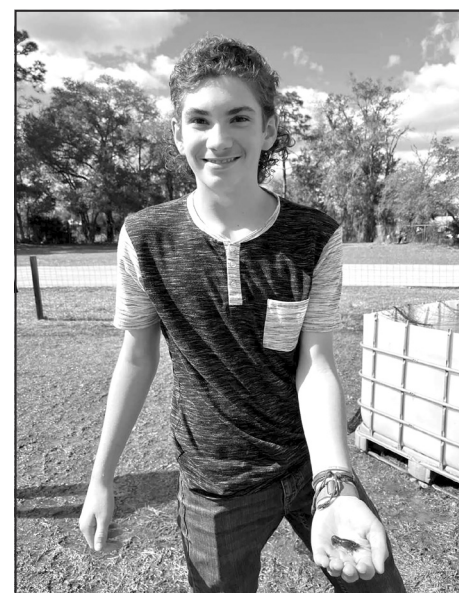
Senior Macy Lofton has been involved in the agriculture program and the school's FFA chapter since her freshman year. She served as the chapter's reporter for two years starting her sophomore year and is now chapter president.

Lofton remembers nothing but good experiences and support from her fellow agriculture and FFA classmates and teachers. She said she was pushed in her freshman year to show pigs at the county fair and fell in love with it.

"I have now shown four pigs and two steers in the Putnam County Fair thanks to that first push to show a pig," Lofton stated.

Lofton said she is certified in agriculture systems, animal science and is close to receiving her agricultural associate certification.

"I recommend the ISHS ag program to anyone planning to attend ISHS,



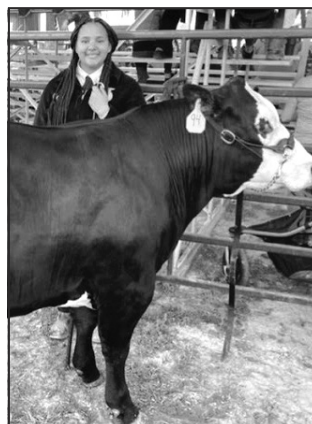
especially if you're an animal-lover like myself," she stated.

## Palatka

Sydney Whitehurst, the agriculture teacher at Palatka, loves seeing her students be successful in class while working in the FFA program.

Like other Putnam schools, Palatka has both a junior FFA chapter, for students in seventh and eighth grades, and a high school chapter.

"They are such smart, driven, and caring students who are focused on improving and building up our chapters to serve our school and the community better," Whitehurst said in a statement. The high school chapter recently held a workshop with the younger FFA students where they taught the seventh and eighth-graders about effectively communicating, teamwork, and being



Photos courtesy of Hollie Knowlton  
TOP: Interlachen Junior-Senior High School swine exhibitors stand with agriculture teacher and program supervisor Hollie Knowlton at the Putnam County Fair. L-R: Interlachen Junior-Senior High School student Mason DeLoach shows off his poultry project at the Putnam County Fair. Interlachen Junior-Senior High School student Alicia Mitchell and her steer, Oliver, at the Putnam County Fair.



a role model, Whitehurst added.

One of the standout programs they have in Palatka's FFA is done by junior-high school student Wyatt Tillis. The school houses an aquaculture system, the agriculture teacher said, with 100 tilapia. In the upcoming years, she said Tillis will showcase the tilapia as his Supervised Agriculture Experience project, which is a hands-on agriculture project that encourages students to explore their passions and interests, according to the National FFA.

For Whitehurst, it's exciting to know the future of agriculture is in great hands, she said.

"My favorite thing about teaching

agriscience classes and FFA at (Palatka High) is helping the students grow their interest within agriculture and fine-tuning their skills to compete in different leadership and career development events," she stated. "Seeing them be successful in class and within FFA is the most rewarding part of my job and I am so happy to be here."

## Q.I. Roberts

At Q.I. Roberts, every one of the agriculture program's 75 students is enrolled in FFA and every student is required to do a Supervised Agriculture Experience project, program teacher Kortni Rogers said.

The students have won awards in categories from blueberry bushes to public speaking on agricultural topics to heavyweight swine.

They have rabbits, goats, chickens, cows and pigs. The students tend to spend their days outside and take many field trips to local farms to learn about agriculture production.

Eighth-grader Brian Bunch, who is the president of the junior-high FFA chapter at Q.I. Roberts, said he likes the friends he's made while in the program. He's competed in several livestock shows, he said, and learned a lot from the experience.

"FFA also has many various leadership opportunities, speaking opportunities, just various events that people can do like things from poultry judging to name a tool," Bunch said.

Isaac Harper, the high school chapter president of FFA at Q.I. Roberts, has always been into animals, he said, and helped found Putnam Academy's FFA chapter.

The chapter president grew up in the woods and around people who have livestock where he helped out every so often with the smaller stuff.

"When the opportunity presented itself in middle school, I jumped on it and just went from there with it," Harper said.

Just because people don't have livestock backgrounds, doesn't mean they can't join FFA, he said.

"It's so much more than just livestock," Harper said.



Courtesy of Kortni Rogers

Courtesy of Kortni Rogers. Q.I. Roberts Junior-Senior High School students perform warm dissections on hens during class.



Sarah Cavacini/Palatka Daily News

Q.I. Roberts Junior-Senior High School's agriculture teacher Kortni Rogers pets one of the class goats.



Courtesy of Kortni Rogers

A Q.I. Roberts Junior-Senior High School student shows off her award-winning blueberry project she entered into the Putnam County Fair.

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# FOR THE GOOD OF THE COMMUNITY

## Local nonprofit reaps benefits of Elkton farm's donations

By Brandon D. Oliver  
PALATKA DAILY NEWS  
*boliver@palatkadailynews.com*

What would American cuisine look like without potatoes? Mashed potatoes, roasted potatoes, French fries, potato chips and even sweet potatoes – all are made possible because of farms and farm workers who grow, harvest and distribute the bulbous plant.

Blue Sky Farms in Elkton – near Hastings, an area renowned for growing potatoes – produces the crop in a number of varieties to be sold to businesses. But it's not just business for Blue Sky. According to the company's website, Blue Sky, 4805 County Road 13, also gives back to good causes.

"Blue Sky Farms is committed to giving back to the local community," the website said. "Over the years, the farm has donated millions of pounds of product to local food banks such as Farm Share and St. Francis House. The farm works to ensure that no product goes to waste."

Despite the farm being in St. Johns County, it donates some of its crops to organizations that help Putnam County residents. Epic-Cure, which distributes free food to people in need, is one of the groups that reap the benefits of Blue Sky's donations.

Epic-Cure was formed in St. Augustine in 2018, and the nonprofit expanded to Putnam County in 2020. Before operating out of its 15,000-square-foot building at 389 N. U.S. 17 in Palatka, Epic-Cure volunteers in Putnam County distributed frozen meals from the parking lot of SERVPRO, 608 Main St. in Palatka.

Ed Killebrew, the owner of SERVPRO and a member of the Epic-Cure advisory board in Putnam, said donations from Blue Sky, Farm Share, local Rotary



File Photos/Palatka Daily News

ABOVE: Hundreds of turkeys are on display as Epic-Cure volunteers in Palatka distribute them to people in need during Thanksgiving 2021. RIGHT: An Epic-Cure volunteer carries a box of food to a recipient's vehicle during a free food distribution in Palatka in 2021.

clubs, and other groups and individuals, Epic-Cure couldn't function.

Even in the early days, he said, the number of people the nonprofit assisted necessitated a large number of donations.

"Epic-Cure has been serving the (Putnam) community since about 2020," Killebrew said. "Every week, we were doing about 4,000 to 5,000 meals."

During the summer of 2020, the nonprofit began operating out of its Palatka building, and to this day, it hosts food giveaways on Fridays and Saturdays for people who have registered to receive food.

Much of that food, Killebrew said,





comes from Blue Sky. The farm harvests white, red, yellow and French fingerling potatoes, among other types. Blue Sky also grows sweet potatoes, but not just any sweet potatoes. The business is known for its Violet Queen purple sweet potatoes.

Killebrew said he has witnessed the largess from Blue Sky firsthand.

During one donation, he said, he was surprised by the number of crates of potatoes he saw Blue Sky workers load onto the back of his truck.

“When they get excess stuff, they’ll give it to us,” he said. “Sometimes, they’ll even call us up and offer us something. They were putting (those crates) on my truck two at a time, and they made about 15 trips.”

Epic-Cure’s giveaways are set up like a grocery shopping trip, he said. Rather than passing out random food to people who show up, the nonprofit allows people the chance to peruse the Epic-Cure building to select what they need, Killebrew noted.

Every Friday and Saturday, he said, Epic-Cure serves a total of 800 families,

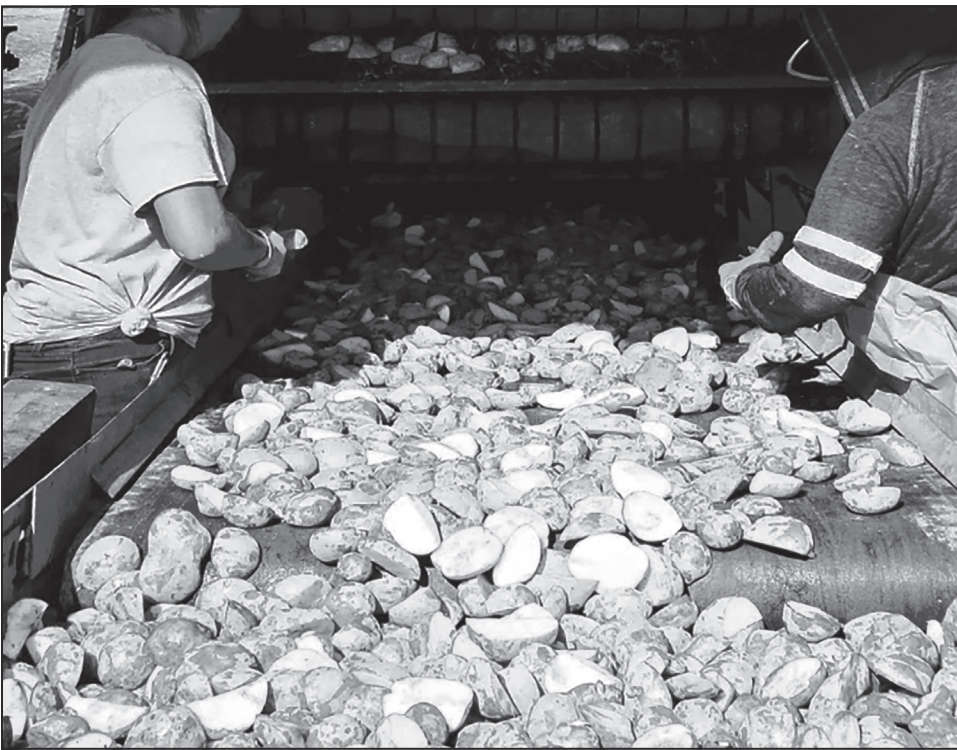
and the nonprofit is at capacity in terms of the number of people it can serve. But whenever people are removed from the list – whether they move, their situations improve to where they don’t need the assistance or for other reasons – other people can be added to Epic-Cure’s registry, Killebrew said.

“You have 30 families per hour,” he said of the weekly giveaways. “They come in and shop. They get what they need, not just what we shove at them.”

Killebrew hopes the partnership with Blue Sky, as well as Epic-Cure’s other partners, will continue. He also encourages people in need to reach out to the nonprofit to try to get on its registry for food giveaways.

To volunteer with Epic-Cure or register for food distributions, call 386-227-7611 or visit either Epic-Cure.org or facebook.com/EpicCureCharityPalatka.

“The list is rather long,” Killebrew said. “As people come off (the list), we put people on.”



Photos courtesy of Blue Sky Farms

Workers at Blue Sky Farms in Elkton sift through thousands of potatoes that will be sold to businesses and given away to charitable organizations, such as Epic-Cure in Palatka.



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# GARDENING IN THESE PUTNAM PLACES

## A Community Effort



Shalisha Bynoe/Special to the Daily News

ABOVE: Newly placed pavers, an irrigation system, and raised garden beds are in view at the Pomona Park Garden.  
RIGHT: June Ulrich, left, and Martha Mann, right, welcome guests to the Pomona Park Community Garden.

**By Shalisha Bynoe**

SPECIAL TO THE  
PALATKA DAILY NEWS

*Two community gardens that have sprouted up in Palatka and Pomona Park grow camaraderie and know-how, as well as healthy food.*

### **Pomona Park Community Garden**

A faint breeze caused leaves to sway peacefully at the Pomona Park Community Garden on South Broward Avenue. The newly designed garden began mid-February and contains six raised beds, compost bins, an irrigation system, and is wheelchair accessible for members who rent space.

Martha Mann, chair of the Beautification  
*12 • Grown in Putnam 2023*

Committee spoke candidly recently about the Pomona Park Garden, its mission for the community and plans to empower a new generation of gardeners.

"Everyone is struggling with fear of food insecurity," Mann said. "You've got a massive price increase for produce and meats. In the community, we're looking to help supplement our food banks through what we produce in our beds. We're going to be donating to food banks locally, and have low-cost options at our monthly breakfast where people can just come in and purchase some produce."

Given land, a budget, and support from the Town of Pomona Park, the Pomona Park Community Garden is an initiative that has gained the interest of community leaders and businesses. Mann said companies such as Walker Land Services, Crescent Moon Homestead, Alliance



Pavers, and Outdoor Brothers have generously donated compost, pavers, plants, and much more.

A lot of research went into the design and creation of the Pomona Park Garden, Mann said, and the goal is to make it sustainable, beautiful, and relaxing.

"At a garden you can release a lot of your feelings,



putting yourself in connection with Mother Earth,” Mann said.“ I believe there’s a whole realm of feelings when you run your feet through the grass. It calms and centers you. It is a holistic type of look at the Earth and what you’re doing. When you're out in nature, instead of stuck inside, your body tends to relax.”

In addition to feelings of tranquility, the garden is organic.

“Mann is going to head over to a nursery and buy a bunch of flowers and plant it,” said June Ulrich, Secretary of the Beautification Committee for the Pomona Park Community Garden. “We will also have pollinators to help to draw the bugs from the vegetables. Some people use pesticides but there won’t be any pesticides here.”

Current members grow okra, tomatoes, lettuce, green beans, radishes, and squash. In addition, members enjoy a partial refund for their rental.

“As we expand, we'll have additional beds for people to rent,” said Ulrich. “They can rent the whole thing for \$40 or a four-by-four section for \$20. As long as they participate in our end-of-season cleanup, they get half of that money back.”

Ulrich acknowledges that there are many challenges for beginner gardeners to combat. She encourages everyone to consider their compost.

“Start yourself a compost pile in the spring or the summer before you want to start gardening,” Ulrich said.“ Start throwing in your coffee grounds. Use all your kitchen waste except proteins. You can put in coffee, you can put in tea bags, you can put in all the scraps from lettuces you're making from salads, and what have you. You can even put cardboard in a compost bin. It does break down and turn into soil. Build a compost pile so that you have good dirt that you don't have to go out and purchase any.”

The ingenuity employed by Mann and Ulrich makes this garden an instant success and a valuable resource for the community. Ulrich mentions that there will be more plans for the garden in the future.

“We want to put in blueberry bushes,” Ulrich said. “Wouldn't it be great if we could use fresh ones? We're looking at putting in different fruit trees that will be sustainable here in Florida. We'll let people know when it's time to harvest and give it away.”

Some additional plans for the community garden include adding raised beds, an aquaponics system, creating educational programs for the community, and creating a koi pond for everyone to enjoy.

The Pomona Park Community Garden is at 115 South Broward Avenue in Pomona Park. For more information about the garden, visit the beautification



TOP: Mixed vegetables are grown at the James H. “Jim” Townsend Community Organic Garden. LEFT: A row of fresh cabbage grows in the ground. RIGHT: A healthy vegetable sprouts from the soil.

committee’s Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/775048920546816/>.

**James H. “Jim” Townsend Community Organic Garden**

A kaleidoscope of color radiated from a rainbow that spread across the South 13th Street Community Garden, which is also known as the James H. “Jim” Townsend Community Organic Garden.

Garden coordinator Shann Purinton stood inside the garden with a welcoming smile and was enthusiastic about speaking about the benefits of being a part of the community garden and how it helps to bring people together.

“I could grow things at my house, but here it's a defined place,” Purinton said. “The sun is wonderful. Originally the garden was covered with mounds and mounds of chips that came from tree companies. And this was a dumping place for them, but people were so helpful. I had a lot of other people that were





Shalisha Bynoe/Special to the Daily News

Members of the lot work on tilling the land and growing their vegetables.

chipping in and helping. We went step by step.”

The community garden, at a little more than nine acres, is owned by the City of Palatka, and the garden is run and managed by the city's Water Works Environmental Education Center volunteers.

The synergy within the garden helps locals and volunteers maintain the plots, which are 11 by 30 feet each and available for rent.

“We have a contract that the gardeners sign,” Purinton said. “It's a \$20 donation that gives gardeners access to water and all the tools in the shed. Almost within a month or more, they make that money back because they get plants and food they can share with their family.”

The contract can be found and downloaded through the city's website.

Garden and Water Works volunteers focus on conservation efforts and educating the community through projects, events, and exhibitions. The organic garden was created to encourage collaborative community efforts and to promote opportunities for locals to grow their own produce.

Purinton spoke about some of her favorite vegetables, which include green beans, broccoli, snow peas, and English peas. She admits that she can taste the difference in the flavor of her greens.

She also mentioned that growers can feel connected to the earth and that growing vegetables can promote a person's health and well-being.

When asked about the growing season, Purinton provides priceless advice.

“The planting season is always changing,” Purinton said. “But there are certain vegetables, like your cruciferous, which are greens. They're the ones you plant in the fall and winter, and they do well. We've had some fabulous lettuce, spinach, those kinds of things. And now we're into the spring. Tomatoes are good to plant now, and cucumbers, squash, all those things. So you have a nice assortment of vegetables to plant in both seasons.”

Jane West, a gardener known to grow different types of Kale, shed some light on some of the things she adds to her soil. West said her compost is organic and keeps her vegetables healthy.



Shalisha Bynoe/Special to the Daily News

Dinosaur Kale grows from the soil.

“I use chicken poop and rabbit poop for my compost, and I have a worm-casting bin,” West said.

As the sun retreated past the horizon, Gardner Palmer Kinser discussed the cultural significance of the garden.

“Well, I'd say that it's certainly an example of a community garden that works,” Kinser said. “There's always a lot of things happening because people are coming from all over the world. We've had people from the Netherlands, Puerto Rico, and people from the Dominican Republic have gardens here. They live here now.”

Purinton describes the James H. “Jim” Townsend Community Garden as more than a place.

“So it's not just about gardening and is more like an experience,” Purinton said. “You meet different people, feel a part of something, and try growing vegetables. It is what makes the garden very interesting.”

The James H. “Jim” Townsend Community Organic Garden is located within the Water Works Environmental Education Center at 1101 White Water Drive in Palatka and is owned by the City of Palatka. For more information about the garden, visit the City of Palatka website at <https://palatka-fl.gov/326/Community-Organic-Garden>.



# Agriculture by the Numbers



## Florida | Vegetables, Melons and Berries

**Acreage**  
The harvested acreage for 2017 for the published major berries, potatoes, vegetable crops and watermelons totaled 200,600 acres, down 5% from the 211,900 acres harvested the previous year.

- Increased acreage**  
Cabbage 6%  
Strawberries 3%
- Less acreage**  
Potatoes -1%  
Watermelons -2%  
Tomatoes -3%  
Bell Peppers -3%  
Snap Beans -8%  
Cucumbers -12%  
Squash -13%  
Sweet Corn -14%

**Production**  
Production in 2017 of the published major berries, potatoes, vegetable crops and watermelon totaled 39.8 million hundredweight, down 6% from the 42.2 million hundredweight the prior calendar year.

- Production increased**  
Sweet potatoes 41%  
Cabbage 9%  
Tomatoes 3%  
Cucumbers 2%
- Less production**  
Potatoes -1%  
Strawberries -11%  
Sweet Corn -17%  
Squash -18%  
Blueberries -18%  
Snap Beans -23%  
Watermelons -23%

## Farms and Land in Farms

**Putnam has 84,656**  
acres of agriculture. Ag lands are divided up the following crops, woodland and pastures.

<b>13,500</b> acres of cropland used for vegetable production, with potatoes being the largest crop commodity. <b>\$35 Million</b>	Average farm size <b>200 acres</b>	
	Florida ranks <b>18th</b> among all states in number of farms.	Tied at <b>32nd</b> in land in farms

## Livestock

Livestock in Putnam County consists mainly of beef cattle, but dairy cows, poultry, hogs, sheep and horses also contribute.

**4,000 head**  
of beef cattle within cow-calf operations. Approximately 1/3 of the agricultural acreage is used as pastureland, and livestock brings in approximately  
**\$11 MILLION**  
annually.

Source: UF/IFAS Extension (2017 Ag Census)

## Florida | Forestry

As of 2018, **17.2 MILLION ACRES**  
**HALF** of Florida's Surface Area is Forests.

**65% Private Ownership**  
39% Corporate  
26% Family or Individual

**35% Public Ownership**  
17% State  
15% Federal  
3% Local

**ANNUAL TIMBER HARVEST**  
**16.3**  
MILLION TONS

Pine 14.8  
Hardwood & Cypress 1.5

**\$25.1 BILLION IN REVENUE**

Source: Florida Forest Service

Putnam County Profile	2017	2012	% change
Number of Farms	564	430	+ 31
Land in Farms	84,656 acres	70,352 acres	+ 20
Average Size of Farm	150 acres	164 acres	- 8
Market Value of Products Sold	\$46,069,000	\$44,187,000	+ 4
Crop Sales \$37,554,000 (85 percent) Livestock Sales \$6,632,000 (15 percent)			





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