



Rachel Berg, a co-owner of Four Root Farm, weeds a row of lettuce.

## Farmers Adapt to Extremes of Weather

**Editor's Note:** In this "*Climate Change in Our Time & Town*" series, we look at different ways warming temperatures affect our lives, community, and environment.

There may be nothing so predictable as the unpredictability of weather. Just ask a farmer.

Today, as changes in climate brought on by global warming heighten the variability of weather and the challenges it can bring, farmers in East Haddam — like others across Connecticut and the country — face an often dramatically shifting landscape. Warmer temperatures in the winter, frosts in late spring, deluges, and tornadoes can turn their world around.

Aaron Taylor, who, with his wife, Rachel Berg, and Elise Cusano owns Four Root Farm on Tater Hill Road in East Haddam, assumes that every season will bring the unexpected. He cites a crop-planting spreadsheet using data from the last 10 years as a guide for cultivation. While mid-May frosts have historically occurred in Connecticut, today they are unusual. Nonetheless, on May 17-18, freezing temperatures killed many young plants.

To hedge against the vagaries of weather, Taylor diversifies. If one crop is ruined by frost, he has others. This season, Four Root grows organically on about five of the 13 acres. There are 200 varieties of flowers and 100 varieties of vegetables, including kale, lettuce, root crops, and several types of tomatoes. "It can't be monoculture anymore," Taylor said. Four Root sells their produce largely at farmers' markets in East Haddam, Madison, and New Haven. The flowers are sold wholesale.

“In the past, you could (plant) with reasonable assurance” that a crop would at least survive if not thrive, Taylor said. “But every year has been more erratic. Every year there’s always something that’s going to fail.”

In late July, Gov. Ned Lamont announced that Connecticut is seeking a federal agriculture disaster declaration that could provide assistance to farms across the state severely damaged by recent heavy rainfall and flooding. By various estimates, Connecticut received well over 10 inches of rain within the first three weeks of July, a number the governor said is over 400% of the typical rainfall for the month.

At Newberry Farm in town, Anna Quinn has found this season’s rain and humidity to be an even greater challenge than the drought of last year, which brought little or no precipitation from June to August. Also last year, there was a pollination problem, which Quinn has tried to resolve by bringing honey bees to her farm. “I thought that was one of the toughest (seasons) I’ll face,” she said. “But I’ve never had a year like this one.”

Mold and rot have killed some plants on the approximately three acres where she grows vegetables and berries, including raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. The farm has just under 40 acres, much of which is pasture for livestock. An apple orchard, which has a seven-year production cycle, should have a bountiful yield this summer.

The varied produce of Newberry Farm, where Quinn lives with her family and works full-time, is sold at a stand on the property at 63 Newberry Road.

At Walden Farm in Moodus, Casey Greer, his wife, and his mother-in-law have turned what was once a hobby farm into a full-fledged, registered business.

They still manage other jobs — his wife as a schoolteacher and both Greer and his mother-in-law at Dominion Millstone Power Station, where he is a senior nuclear construction specialist.

Greer points to the recent extreme swings of weather, which might go from one month without a drop of rain to the next that brings torrents. This year he lost about 200 garlic bulbs, but he’s been able to abundantly supply both his booth at the weekly Higganum Farmers’ Market and his offerings as a member of Healthy PlanEat, an online marketplace with fresh food from farms in the region and from food artisans.

“There’s no question we’re being hit with heavier and more frequent storms, severe storms,” he said. The best approach to farming in town and elsewhere, he said, more frequently relies on so-called general farming, in which no one crop generates more than 50 percent of total income. Food scarcities across the country, Greer thinks, might become prevalent as monoculture farming suffers more crop losses. At that point, he said, consumers will turn to local sources for fresh, sustainable produce.

“I see it as a constant challenge,” he said. “We all should try to limit the causes of climate change. ... We need more of an organic approach to what we do in our lives and how we grow (food).”

To that end, Walden Farm encourages measures — from chemical-free cultivation to biodegradable containers for produce — to help in creating a healthier climate.

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