Agricultural Info Sheet

Mushrooms in Chester County

General Facts

Why is mushroom farming such an important part of Chester County?

In the late 1800s, William Swayne, a successful Kennett Square florist, developed the idea of growing mushrooms beneath his greenhouse benches to maximize production space. His son expanded the business to include a mushroom spawn plant and a cannery, which encouraged others to enter the mushroom growing business as well.

"Chester County is ranked 1st in the nation for mushroom production by county."

How are mushrooms grown?

Mushrooms, which double in size every 24 hours, are grown indoors on wooden or aluminum stacked beds. Mushroom farmers usually grow 4–6 crops per year per growing house with an average production time of 8–12 weeks per crop. In total, mushroom farmers cultivate about 11.2 million square feet of growing space in Chester County.

Chester County Ag Council

What kinds of mushrooms are grown in Chester County?

White Button, Portobello and Crimini varieties are the primary type grown in Chester County. However, production and sales of specialty mushrooms, such as Shiitake and Oyster mushrooms, are on the rise.

Are most Chester County mushroom farms family owned?

The majority of Chester County mushroom farms are multi-generational family farms in their third, fourth and even fifth generations.

What am I smelling when I drive through the mushroom-growing areas of southern Chester County?

The odor often associated with mushroom production actually comes from the production of mushroom substrate, the composted materials upon which mushrooms are grown. There is relatively little odor from growing mushrooms per se.

Conservation

What conservation practices do Chester County mushroom farmers employ to mitigate odors and protect environmental resources?

All mushroom farms are required to have a **Mushroom Farm Environmental Management Plan** (MFEMP), or a permit from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, which outlines how a farm will be managed to protect natural resources (i.e. soil, air, water). These plans are developed in conjunction with our Conservation District.

In addition, farmers have invested in new technologies such as aerated bunkers, energy efficient air conditioning systems and mechanized growing rooms to help conserve resources and mitigate odor.

Agricultural Relationships

How does mushroom farming fit into the fabric of Chester County agriculture?

Growing mushrooms is part of a sustainable agricultural system. The process used to make mushroom substrate requires by-products from other agricultural industries, such as straw, hay, corn cobs, and horse and poultry manure. Without mushroom farms, other agricultural producers in the county would need to find alternative ways to dispose of their by-products.

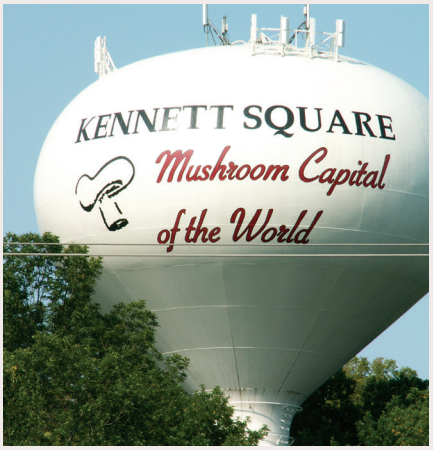
After a mushroom harvest, farmers are left with a nutrient-rich growing material. After steam-pasteurization, it is sold as mushroom compost, also referred to as spent mushroom substrate, which can be used in a variety of home garden applications, as well as commercial applications, including mine reclamation, stormwater management basins, erosion control and crop fertilization.

Economic Impact

How do mushroom farmers attract and retain their workforce?

It is demanding work to produce consistent, high-quality mushrooms, but the local mushroom industry has been paying wages exceeding the minimum wage for over two decades.

The industry owes much of its success to immigrant workers, many of whom come from Mexico. But contrary to some misconceptions, all workers must provide documentation of eligibility to work in the United States before beginning work on a mushroom farm.



What kind of economic impact does mushroom farming have in Chester County?

According to the 2019-2020 Mushroom Crop Report, mushroom sales from the approximately 50 mushroom farms growing agaricus mushrooms in Chester County totaled about $398,000,000. With the addition of sales from specialty mushrooms, it is evident that the industry is significant to the county.

Food Safety

Mushroom farmers follow **Mushroom Good Agricultural Practices** (MGAP), a set of rigorous voluntary standards for safe growing, harvesting and handling of mushrooms to help ensure consumer safety.

These practices were developed by the American Mushroom Institute, USDA and Penn State University. They continue to influence food safety practices in other farming sectors today.