

Oral History of Illinois Agriculture



Crop Timeline

Farmers have not always grown the crops they grow today. Many factors go into the choice of crops to grow.

Market forces affect the choice — farmers will not grow what they cannot eat or sell.

Disease or infestation can cause a reduction or abandonment of the production of a crop.

Changes in technology can cause the production of a crop to increase or decrease.

Farmers in the early twentieth century grew a wider range of crops than do farmers today.

Illinois State Museum



[Http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us](http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us)

Make a Timeline of Crops

They divided their acreage into 20-40 acre fields and grew corn, wheat, oats, barley, and other grain crops. Today most farmers grow only one or two different crops, such as corn and soybeans.

In the oral histories of the AV Barn, farmers talked about this subject. They listed some of the crops their father's generation grew and compared them with the crops they grow now. They gave the reasons for the changes.

As you browse or search the oral histories for crops, and look through the picture galleries, you will come across crops with which

you may not be familiar.

Our sample crop, sorghum, is one such crop. It was popular a hundred and more years ago, when sugar was a luxury item bought in stores.

In the next section of this activity, information about sorghum production and processing provides a model for research you might do into a crop.

The quest is to find out when, where and why a crop was produced, when production peaked, if it has, or when and why it declined. You can graph that information for a visual image of the increase and decline of a crop.

Build a Timeline

Special points of interest:

- Introduction
- Timeline
- Spotlight on Sorghum
- Learning Standards
- To Think About
- Time Charts

Build a timeline of crops from the late 19th century to today and research why some crops were dropped from production as others were added, what products replaced the earlier ones, or how technology changes resulted in changes in crops.

See Page 5 for charts.

Present your research results orally with a visual timeline (poster or Power Point slides). Here is a page of timeline forms in pdf printable format. <http://www.donnayoung.org/history/timeline.htm>

Suggested crops from which to choose:

Rye
Wheat
Oats
Corn

Soybeans
Sunflowers
Turnips
Squash or pumpkin
Clover (cover crop)
Popcorn
Hops
Buckwheat
Barley
Millet
Cotton
Tobacco
Sugar beets
Castor beans

Other

Spotlight on Sorghum— corn syrup of yesterday

Through the early twentieth century, farmers grew the sorghum plant as a crop for both animal feed and people food. Most small farms grew enough sorghum for their own needs. Some farms grew enough to sell at the mill.

The plant was crushed for its juice, which was boiled down into a thick, sweet liquid called molasses that was used in place of store-bought sugar in baking and jam-making. It was also added to cattle feed as a nutrient.



*Mowing Sorghum on the Baumberger Farm, Bond County, Illinois, 1914
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Oral History Collection*

Search the Oral Histories:

The AVBarn interviewees who talked about sorghum production and mills and molasses making are Bert Aikman, John Keith, Alice Martin, Jessie Saiter, and Anna Williams. Listen to their audio segments and clips that describe the crop and the process.

Search for sorghum and molasses in the Clip Search section by keyword, or browse the terms of the five themes (people, plants, animals, technology,

and land) in the right sidebar (click *more...*), and find the terms *molasses*, *sorghum*, and *sorghum mill*.

Search the Web for more information on sorghum, when American farmers stopped growing it, and what products replaced sorghum in cooking and cattle feed. Research the crop for new uses, such as a biofuel renewable energy crop. What other uses does it have? Where in the world is it still a food crop?

<http://www.nass.usda.gov/> is the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

(Search it by type (Field Crops for sorghum), then choose Sorghum and search. Scroll down the result page for acreage by year map. See fewer acres since 1986.)

The State of Sorghum Today

Take a survey of your friends and relatives to see how many know what molasses is.

Find out where molasses is sold today, and in what commercial products you could find molasses. Buy a jar and try it.

Make gingerbread with one of the many Molasses Gingerbread recipes on the Web.

Look up whether sorghum is a major crop in another part of the world. You may be surprised!

For Teachers—National Standards

Historical Thinking Standards for Grades 5-12

Standard 1: Chronological Thinking

- A. Distinguish between past, present, and future time.
- E. Interpret data presented in time lines and create time lines.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

- A. Formulate historical questions.
- B. Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.
- D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place.
- E. Employ quantitative analysis.
- F. Support interpretations with historical evidence.



Corn Maze on the Ackerman Farm. A crop grown for tourism!

ISBE (Illinois) Social Studies Standards

STATE GOAL 15:

Understand economic systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

A. Understand how different economic systems operate in the exchange, production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.

Late Elementary: 15.A.2a

Explain how economic systems decide what goods and services are produced, how they are

produced and who consumes them. *(Farmers stopped growing certain crops when other crops or products were developed, when cost of production increased, when consumer tastes changed, or when technology changed production methods)*

STATE GOAL 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

B. Understand the roles and

interactions of individuals and groups in society.

Late Elementary: 18.C.2:

Describe how changes in production (e.g., hunting and gathering, agricultural, industrial) and population caused changes in social systems. *(When sugar cane, sugar beet, and corn sugar production became widespread and affordable, and popular, the growing of sorghum became less profitable.)*



Mounds of alfalfa on the Dougan Dairy Farm in the 1930s. It was grown as a fodder mix to feed the dairy cows.

To Think About:

Oats were grown on every farm until the 1940s They were fed to horses. What do you think happened when farmers started using tractors instead of horses to pull plows and other field machinery?

What happened to corn production in the 1990s-2000s when the demand for biofuels went up, up, up?

Today, not all farmers want to have thousands of acres to produce millions of bushels of corn or soybeans. Farming is diversifying again. Farmers can find a niche market for specialty crops, such as pumpkins.

The Ackermans did just that. They looked for some crops that were specialty crops, and chose several of them. They sell forty different kinds of squash and gourds at their roadside store, as well as chrysanthemums. They attract tourists with their corn maze, pumpkin patch, petting zoo, and shop.



The Ackerman Farm in Tazewell County sells most of its pumpkins to the Libby Pumpkin Canning Factory in Morton, which processes eighty per cent of all canned pumpkin in the U.S.

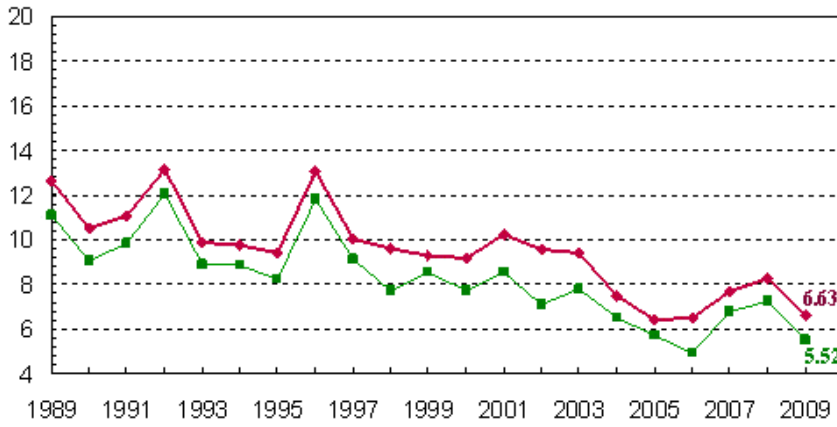
Timeline Charts—Use NASS



U.S. Sorghum Acres



Million Acres



◆ Planted ■ Harvested

USDA-NASS
01-12-10

You can use the **National Agricultural Statistics Website** to find production of the crop in which you are interested. It allows you to search by crop, date, state, and even county.

The chart to the left gives you an idea of how sorghum production has declined in the U.S. over the last twenty years. It has decreased by more than half.

You can use this information to build a timeline of multiple crops. It might look like this (lower left).

