

Farmers adapting to drought challenge

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May 16, 2015

"We're also getting weather stations in two or three of the larger ranches so that we can monitor our climate and our soil profile, so we can better manage our water," Serrato said.

But there's a limit to how much water can be conserved. Beyond a certain point, reducing watering hurts the trees so they produce fewer or less desirable fruits.

The cost of water -- the largest single expense for local avocado growers -- is also a concern. While avocado prices have firmed up recently, the cost of water outpaces that increase.

At least on some properties, that unfavorable trend is being reversed, said Larson, of the county Farm Bureau. New methods of planting avocado trees have increased the number that can be packed into a given area, boosting production, while using the same amount of water.

Avocado trees have been traditionally planted 20 feet apart, 100 per acre. Each tree's branches converge on the others, creating a giant canopy that produces avocados for decades.

"When water was \$200 an acre-foot, \$600 an acre-foot, maybe even \$1,000 an acre, it wasn't that difficult to make a profit with avocados with that strategy," Larson said. But as prices continue to soar, those days are ending.

The new technique, "dense planting," quadruples density to 400 avocado trees per acre. The groves are managed differently, for example, the trees must be pruned, which is not done with traditionally planted groves.

"The folks in the industry are pretty much agreed that we're going to grow more avocados in San Diego County 10 years from now than we grow now, but it's going to be on less acreage," Larson said. "The inefficient groves that get their water turned off are going to go away, but these very efficient groves where they do the dense planting are going to produce a lot more fruit."

About 12,000 pounds of avocados are produced annually under traditional planting; dense-planted groves are expected to produce 30,000 to 35,000 pounds annually, Larson said, with the same amount of water.

"It's a dramatic change, and we look forward to seeing that happen," Larson said.

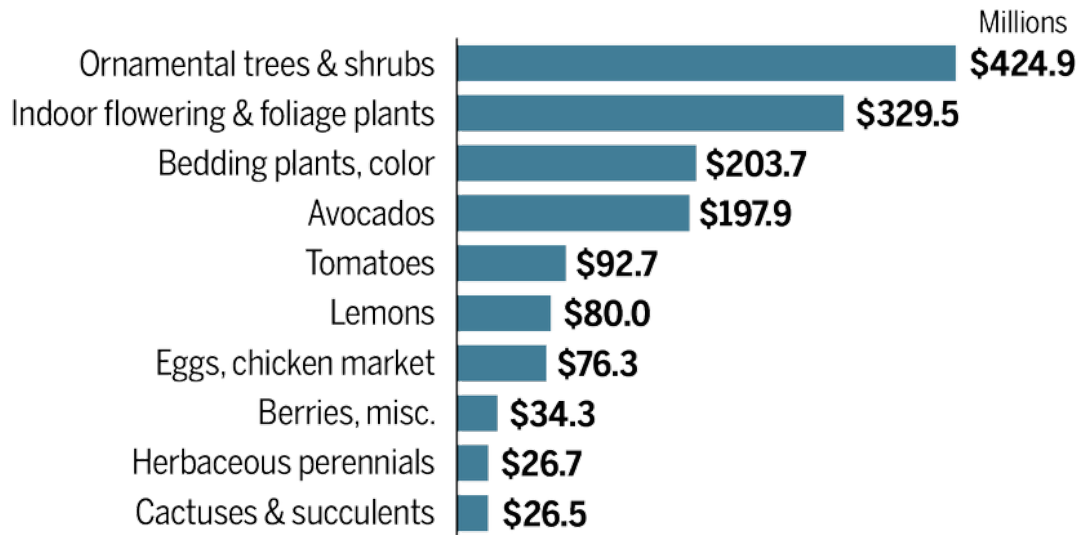
Agriculture in San Diego County

The total area devoted to major crops countywide in 2013 was more than 300,000 acres, or about 475 square miles. About one of every 10 acres in the county is used for agriculture.

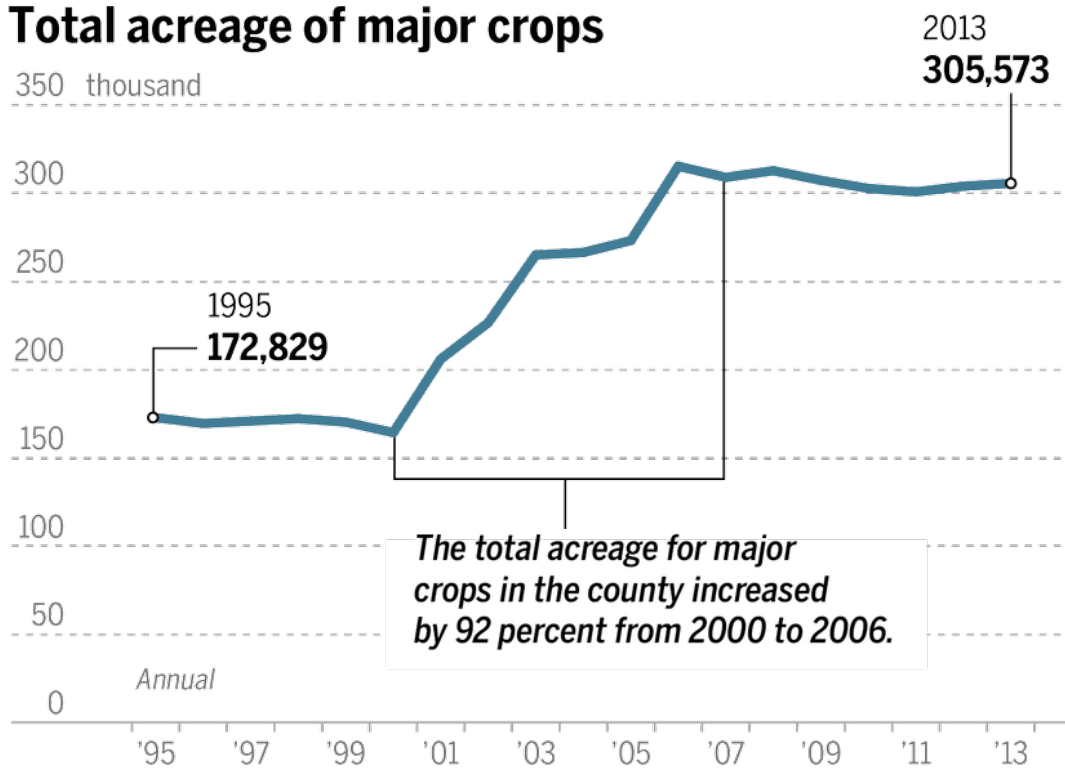
The dollar value of those crops — nursery and cut flower products, fruits and nuts, vegetables, livestock and poultry products, field crops, apiary and timber products — was more than \$1.8 billion.

Value of agriculture in San Diego County

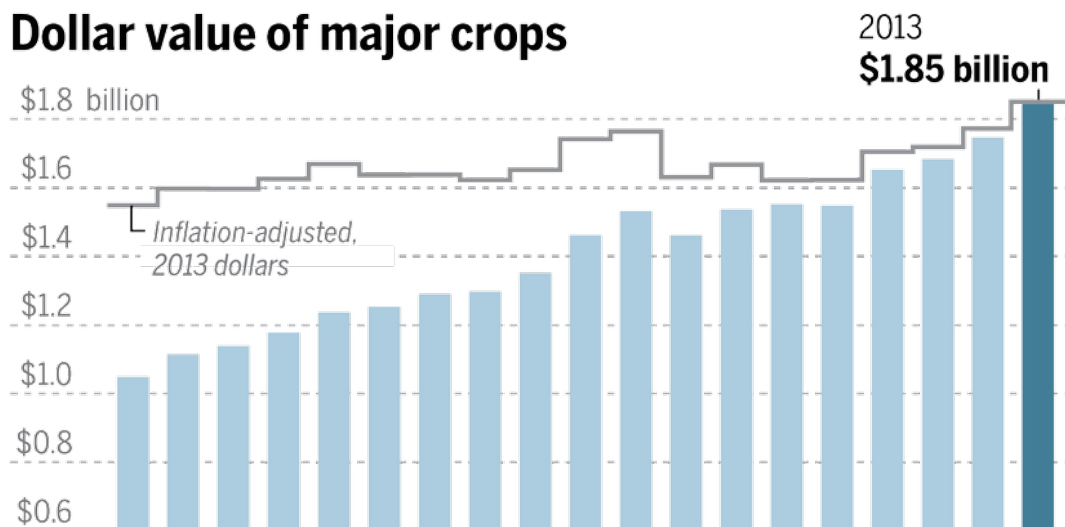
Top 10 crops ranked by total value countywide, 2013:

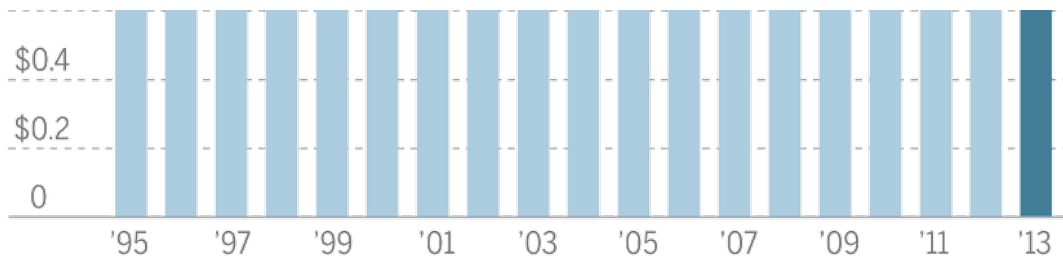


Total acreage of major crops



Dollar value of major crops





Sources: San Diego County Department of Agriculture,
Weights and Measures; San Diego County Water Authority

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