

Australian farms and farming communities

Farming is an economically and culturally important part of life in Australia.

Many Australians are directly or indirectly involved in farming. For those Australians not involved with farming, the country's recent rural and agricultural history still has strong links to the heritage and culture of Australia.

An overview of the history of farming in Australia

In the first few decades after European settlement in Australia, farms developed around the early settlements. These farms mainly grew wheat crops and raised sheep that had originally been brought over from Europe.

Farming in the 1800s

Government sponsored exploration throughout the 1800s opened up new tracts of land, and farmers and 'squatters' gradually moved inland and occupied huge areas of pasture. The creation of railways from the 1850s onwards began to connect the more remote farmers with quicker and easier transport of their produce to cities and ports. Huge areas of forest and scrub (land covered with low trees or shrubs) were cleared for pasture along Australia's coast and inland.

The dry climate and infertile soil of Australia presented challenges to farmers from the start, but they quickly determined that the country was well suited for production of high quality wool. Wool became the cornerstone of Australian agriculture and Australia is often said to have 'ridden on the sheep's back' through the early days of its economic development.

Water availability and drought management were, and still are, key challenges for farmers throughout most of Australia. As irrigation systems were established further inland, new farming practices other than sheep grazing became more viable.

Farming in the 1900s



Bales of wool at Woolwash, Natiola, Momba Station c.1870, photograph: albumen. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#).

Aboriginal people working as stockmen, stockwomen, and in other support roles on the big pastoral spreads, who made a significant contribution to Australian agriculture.

By the outbreak of World War I, rabbits had become a major pest to farmers. The rabbits spread north from Geelong in Victoria, and seriously reduced the productivity of farming in Australia. Rabbit control is still a major issue for farmers and governments today.



Burning and harvesting sugar cane at Ingham, Queensland, 1986. Image courtesy of the [National Archives of Australia](#): A6135, K13/10/86/139.

By the early part of the 20th century, Australia's agricultural production had rapidly increased and output expanded well beyond the needs of the Australian population. This increased production led Australia to become one of the world's major food exporters.

Across much of the early 20th century, the Australian government provided assistance to farmers and primary producers in the form of bounties, to encourage production, employment and export. The government also placed tariffs on some goods to discourage imports.

Despite huge impacts from the Great Depression, and the first and second World Wars, Australian agriculture continued to grow throughout the first half of the 20th century.

The relative importance of farming to the Australian economy has decreased in the second half of the 20th century. Only three per cent of the country's population is now employed in farming. Government assistance has been reduced, and wool is no longer such a significant and valuable commodity. Small farming operations are less important than large ones. Farmers have been forced to innovate and diversify to survive.

Farming in Australia today

Economic importance of farming in Australia

Agriculture is an important sector for the Australian economy, generating up to \$39 billion in gross value each year.

Farming employs around 370,000 people across Australia.

Although agriculture is not as extensive as at its peak in the mid 1970s, farms still take up around sixty per cent of all the land in Australia.

Farms in Australia have traditionally been family businesses, passed on from generation to generation. However, since the 1950s, international economic factors and changes in farming methods have led to larger farms being more economically viable than small ones. The number of farming families in Australia has steadily decreased and the average size of farms has increased.

Many modern farmers find that they struggle to make a profit and some are forced to find extra work off the farm to supplement the farm income.

Types of farming in Australia

Different types of farming are mainly concentrated in the areas that suit them best, depending on water availability and climatic conditions.

Livestock grazing activity, mainly sheep and cattle, takes up the most land in Australian agriculture. Sheep are mostly found in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria.

About ninety per cent of all cattle are used for beef. Queensland and New South Wales are Australia's main beef cattle producers, with the Northern Territory contributing to ten per cent of the beef cattle market.

Most dairy cattle farming is found in the southern states, predominantly in Victoria.

Crop growing contributes to over fifty per cent of the value of Australian agriculture every year. Wheat and other grain crops are spread fairly evenly across New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland.

Sugar cane is a major crop in Queensland and New South Wales.

Fruit growing is spread across all Australian states and vegetables are grown in all states and territories.

Drought and other impacts of the Australian climate

One of Australia's most well-known poems, *My Country* by Dorothea Mackellar, contains the lines 'A land ... of droughts and flooding rains'. To many people, this sums up the difficulties of being a farmer in Australia.

Australia is the world's driest inhabited continent; only Antarctica has less rainfall. Large tracts of land throughout inland Australia are prone to droughts, sometimes lasting several years.

Irrigation is a very important factor in making farming viable in inland Australia. Vast irrigation systems, such as the Snowy Scheme have been established to divert water inland for farming. Water is also obtained by boring underground and is stored in dams on farms.

Australian soils generally have a low fertility, so superphosphate and nitrogen are widely needed to compensate. Farmers also face challenges dealing with soil erosion and salinity.

The cultural importance of farming in Australia

Even though over sixty per cent of Australians live in the capital cities, as a nation Australia still recognises its close affinity to the unique landscape of the countryside and to those who live on the land.

Regional centres and towns are important social and economic communities throughout Australia. Whereas the capital cities are concentrated mainly along the Australian coast, rural towns have spread across the country's interior to service the outlying farms and farming communities.

Many country towns and farming communities are popular tourist destinations for Australians and international visitors. They offer an opportunity to gain an insight into the history of Australia, to enjoy the more relaxed lifestyle, to sample the local food and produce, and to admire the beauty of the farming landscape.

Agricultural shows

Many towns and cities in Australia have annual agricultural shows. At these events, exhibitors representing rural producers, organisations and companies provide people in the cities with a glimpse of the rural lifestyle and produce.

The Sydney Royal Easter Show is Australia's largest agricultural annual event and The Royal Melbourne Show is Victoria's largest public event. Hundreds of thousands of people come to each of these shows every year.

The enduring popularity of agricultural shows is evidence of the important contribution that farms and rural communities continue to make towards shaping Australia.

Importance of technology in Australian farming

Technology greatly impacts on farming in Australia. Scientific and technical advances have helped to make Australian farmers some of the world's leaders in efficiency and productivity.

For most of the 1800s, most farming tasks used manual labour along with horses and bullocks. Today, powerful and technologically advanced machinery has replaced much of the human and animal toil involved in farming.



Using camels to build a dam to water sheep in far western New South Wales, 1953. Image courtesy of the [National Archives of Australia](#): A1200, L15616.

A number of Australian inventions and technological advances helped the expansion of farming around the turn of the 20th century. Inventions such as the stump jump plough, the combine harvester and the 'scrub' roller helped farmers to make the most of the harsh Australian environment.

Irrigation advances, such as the discovery and use of underground water from the Great Artesian Basin and the development of irrigation around Mildura, helped to provide much-needed water for Australian farmers.

The effectiveness of farming has also improved with scientific advances in fertilisation, genetics, irrigation and disease control. Drought-resistant strains of crops have been developed. Animals have been selectively bred for the quality of their meat and wool.

The adoption of new technologies remains vital for farmers to continue to operate sustainably and profitably. Farmers are using satellite technology in a number of ways, and are adopting more efficient methods of channelling water to where it is needed.

There has also been an increase in the use of information technology on farms in recent years, with most farms having computers and Internet access.

Life on an Australian farm in the 21st century

Despite all the changes in Australian farming communities over the centuries, there is still a strong sense of tradition and pride among Australian farmers today. While technological and economic factors have a huge impact on the rural existence, many of the old-fashioned values of farming are as strong as ever for Australian farming families.

Allan Gardy has been farming in the Wimmera region of Western Victoria since the 1950s. He and his wife, Pat, operate the wheat and sheep farm that Allan's father passed down to him. They have also diversified into other crops, such as chickpeas and lentils, that are well suited to the dry farming conditions of the Wimmera.

Like Australian farmers for decades before them, the Gardy family are also at the mercy of nature. Often the only thing separating a good year from a bad year is the luck of having the right amount of rainfall at the right time. Water is channelled in for the sheep to drink, but as Allan says, 'If it doesn't rain, the wheat doesn't grow that season. This is a dry farming area, so the crops aren't irrigated.'

While some of the tools and techniques of farming have changed, others have remained the same. Allan is as proud of his working dogs as he is of his high-tech farming equipment. The Australian farm dog is a tradition that has remained in modern farming because it is still an effective way to round up sheep and cattle. Working dogs are well treated, but unlike most domestic pet dogs, they are rarely allowed inside the house.

Like many Australian farmers, the Gardy family work hard. The work hours are dictated by the requirements of the land and the crops. At harvest time, work can continue well into the night, with huge floodlights fitted to harvesters to light up the fields.

Despite the pressures and hard work, the Gardy family are socially involved in their community. They are never too busy for a chat when neighbours, family and friends drop in. They regularly play and socialise at the local golf club. When Allan celebrated his 70th birthday in the local hall, dozens of friends and family members attended.

As is common in farming families, when Pat and Allan's children grew up, they moved away from the farm, seeking opportunities for work in larger towns and cities. But their youngest son, Paul, has since moved back to the farm and is working with Allan to learn the art of farming. Pat and Allan are proud that their son will carry on the family tradition of running the farm. (Source: Interview with Allan Gardy, June 2004).