

How Amazing is Corn?

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Despite summer's drought, this fall has been one of remarkable foliage in many locations. There to accompany our vibrant autumnal show are numerous New England fall venues including apple picking, fall craft fairs, pumpkin patches, apple cider donuts, and for those looking for something a little more challenging, corn mazes.

At last count, there were close to a couple dozen corn mazes in Connecticut. Type into your search engine 'corn mazes in Connecticut' to find one near you. Size varies up to about 7 acres with a mile or more of paths leading through the mazes. A few farms have shorter mazes to accommodate children and people with disabilities. Others have flashlight mazes – enter at your own peril! Some need you to solve interactive mystery questions to move closer to the exit. Others offer adult only, libations included, corn mazes. There is probably a corn maze to suit whatever mood you and your family are in when you have time to visit.

The array of other activities at the farms varies so pick the one that you and your family would enjoy the most. Some farms offer pick your own apples and/or pumpkins. At others, you may enjoy a hayride or get to visit farm animals ranging from turkeys to llamas. Some have fields of sunflowers to admire and take a selfie in.

Many have farm stores where you can purchase locally grown produce, plants, and meats. Some have dairy treats such as ice cream, yogurt or cheese. I picked up the greatest tasting eggnog at a farm store so be sure to check out what local products are available to you.

Not only are the corn mazes fun for you and your family to visit but they provide an additional source of income (and pride) to local farmers. I think, even more importantly, that they give many people who do not live near farms or, even if they do and are unaware of all of the challenges, intricacies and decisions farmers have to make on a daily basis, a great opportunity to learn more about local agriculture and all it offers and all the hard work that goes into producing food for us all.

Celebrating agriculture and nature is the theme behind Fort Hill Farm's 'Tree of Life' corn maze according to Kristin Orr. Located in nearby Thompson, CT, many do not know about their connection to the great landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed their property in 1872. While corn mazes and pumpkins draw autumn visitors, nature walks, joyercise, lovely gardens and other outdoor enticements are offered year-round. Visits to the farm, whether for the corn maize or other options, are by appointment only. Register at: <https://forthillfarms.com/>

How did corn mazes originate? There is some conflicting information. Many sources cite that the first corn maze in the U.S. was created in 1993 by Don Frantz, a creative director and producer) and Adrian Fisher. Other newspaper sources note that corn mazes were created on a smaller scale in the 1980s.

If one goes with the 1993 version, then there was a 3-acre corn maze cut into a dinosaur pattern at Lebanon Valley Cottage in Annville, PA called 'Cornelius the Cobassaurus'. Between the

crowds of interested attendees and media attention, other farms noticed the attraction and they started creating corn mazes too. Today more than 500 corn mazes are created in the U.S. each year. Stony Brook Farms in Foley, MN holds the prize for the largest maze in 2022 covering 110 acres and having 32 miles of pathways!

Back in the old days, farmers or corn maze designers would use a grid system to plot out their design. Varieties of silage corn that would grow tall enough to use in a maze would be planted by machine over the desired acres devoted to corn maze areas.

Seeds are planted, fertilized and irrigated as possible or as necessity entails. When corn reaches a few inches in height, the maze paths are created either manually or, more commonly now by machine. Designs, originally drafted on graph paper have given way to GPS and computer generation.

While we might think of corn mazes as a novel New England innovation, mazes have held places in history since the days of the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. Mythology informs us that labyrinths were built to hold the terrifying Minotaur thousands of years ago. When Europeans embraced the trend, large plantings of evergreens in formal labyrinth designs lead visitors to the center of the maze. Other mazes were linked to more religious and ceremonial uses.

Whatever your reason, get out and enjoy the corn mazes and other offerings of our local farms. They need you and you need them. Enjoy this most iconic New England time of year by enjoying our unique scenery and supporting our local farms.

For information about growing corn in your garden or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.