



Pennsylvania  
Department of Agriculture

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## **Driving Innovation in Agriculture: New Center for Plant Excellence Supports Skilled Workforce, Research, and Development for Pennsylvania's Economic Powerhouse Plant-Based Ag Sector**

**Doylestown, PA – Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding** joined **Delaware Valley University President Dr. Benjamin Rusiloski** today for an up-close look at vital career development opportunities in horticulture and plant science preparing students to lead Pennsylvania's \$132.5 billion agriculture industry in the future. Building the skilled, future-ready workforce Pennsylvania's diverse plant-based ag sector needs to innovate and grow is a top priority of Pennsylvania's new **Center for Plant Excellence**, a **Shapiro Administration** initiative [launched in March 2025](#).

"The Center for Plant Excellence will enhance Pennsylvania's global competitiveness by supporting invaluable learning opportunities like those Delaware Valley University offers to give students critical thinking skills and research and practical experience employers need," said **Secretary Redding**. "By combining the expertise of our world-class research and teaching institutions, with that of leaders across the plant sector, we hope to make strategic investments where the industry needs them most and help ensure that Pennsylvania continues to be a national leader."

**Dr. Carla D. Garzon**, who holds Delaware Valley University's K.H. Littlefield Endowed Professorship of Plant Science, serves on the center's board, along with leaders of forestry, landscaping and nursery businesses, public gardens, orchards, vineyards, and tree farms.

"One of the most rewarding parts of my work is mentoring students who are eager to explore plant science, **Dr. Garzon** said. "I'm honored to contribute my expertise in hemp and other specialty crops to a board that is dedicated to advancing research and preparing the next generation of scientists, growers and innovators."

**Governor Josh Shapiro** secured funding for the new center in his first budget to help drive economic growth by fostering collaboration, investing in research, and equipping businesses with the resources they need to compete. The center, with a \$500,000 investment from the **Shapiro Administration**, is led by **Penn State Extension's Miranda Harple**, and is a partnership among **the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Penn State University** and leaders across the spectrum of specialty crop production, horticulture, landscaping, and forest products.

The [center's first grant opportunity](#) is now open, inviting proposals through November 6, 2025. A total of \$125,000 is available for projects focused on career development, combatting threats to plant health, expanding industry visibility, and fostering business resilience and innovation.

"Pennsylvania's plant industries are incredibly diverse," said **Harple**. "They include public gardens and greenhouse growers, fruit and vegetable growers, hemp and Christmas tree farms, and forestry professionals. What unites them is the need to be adaptive and forward thinking.

"The center builds on Penn State Extension's longstanding commitment to delivering science-based education to Pennsylvania's agricultural communities. This funding is designed to advance applied research and training that translate directly into real-world solutions for growers and businesses across the commonwealth."

Pennsylvania's plant sector is a powerhouse of economic activity. The state ranks first in the nation for the number of floriculture businesses, with 741 operations generating \$209 million in annual sales. Pennsylvania also boasts one of the country's most valuable hardwood industries, contributing \$21.8 billion to the economy. The specialty crop sector is equally strong, with Pennsylvania ranking fourth in apple production and maintaining a top position in vegetable and small fruit sales. These industries not only fuel the economy but also enhance Pennsylvania's landscapes, tourism, and quality of life.

**Governor Shapiro's** 2025-26 budget proposal calls for investments to continue Pennsylvania's national legacy as an agricultural leader, including:

- An additional **\$13 million** in the Ag Innovation Program to help build the future of American agriculture right here in Pennsylvania. In its first open application period, the Ag Innovation Program received 159 applications for nearly \$70 million worth of innovation projects.
- Continued support for the [Center for Livestock and Poultry Excellence](#), Center for Beef Excellence, and the [Center for Dairy Excellence](#), critical partners in providing equipment, personnel, training, and research funding to protect Pennsylvania's animal agriculture sectors.
- Continued support for poultry producers to help them recover losses from Highly Pathogenic Avian influenza and improve biosecurity on their farms with the nation's only HPAI recovery fund. With \$13.5 million in grants distributed and applications open for a sixth round, **\$61.5 million** in funds remain for use in 2025-26.

These investments are crucial for the future and continued excellence of Pennsylvania agriculture. By supporting family farms and the infrastructure and workforce they need to thrive, the Governor is helping to build a more resilient agricultural economy,

safeguard the food supply, and secure a prosperous future for Pennsylvania communities.

Read more about commonsense investments to keep Pennsylvania agriculture competitive and thriving in Governor Josh Shapiro's 2025-26 budget proposal at [shapirobudget.pa.gov](https://shapirobudget.pa.gov).

Visit the [Center for Plant Excellence](#) website to learn more about the center and [how to apply for grants](#).

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