

FRESH

From page 1

trucked in from 1,000 miles away.”

It's also often less expensive than store-bought produce, he added.

The growing popularity of farmers' markets was not lost on companies like Wal-Mart, who developed smaller outlets that give a nod to the idea of local, fresh foods. The stores are located near residential areas and called a "Neighborhood Market." But almost all of the produce sold there is shipped from a distribution center in Arcadia, said produce department lead David Smith in Fort Myers - not directly from a farm.

"I think people are nostalgic," said Terry Dean, owner of Tamiami Produce in San Carlos Park. "They want to know where their produce comes from."

A truck bed full of Georgia peppers at the Immokalee market represented where most local produce comes from now, vendors say: northern Florida and southern Georgia. That's because itinerant growers travel north, followed by the withering summer heat and humidity that make it harder to grow successfully. They get as far as Michigan before coming back when cooler, dryer days resume.

That's why some markets, like Ritchey's Produce in Fort Myers and Naples, are closed until the fall. Others like the one in Immokalee are scaled back - it is one of 13 markets regulated by the state, which rent space to local vendors as well as large scale distributors like Sysco.

The Department of Agriculture counts at least 80 to 100 more local open-air venues, like Oakes Brothers Produce on McGregor Boulevard in Fort Myers.

But myriad others dot the countryside, in parking lots and along the road. Some are as simple as watermelons sold from the back of a pickup truck. Others, like James Stewart's cart on McGregor Boulevard and School Street in Fort Myers, are organized and established. He's been there 11 years and is open seven days per week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Last Friday he sold goods including Georgia peaches, tomatoes and Florida sweet corn.

And some local flea markets, like the ones on Ortiz Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Fort Myers, specialize in not only fresh, local produce, but egg-producing fowl and vast arrays of other odds and ends.

Downtown Fort Myers

Like a handful of downtown business people, Jim Sherron said he likes to hit the Fort Myers Downtown Farmer's Market early, before going to work at an office a few blocks away. The market is open from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Thursday.

"My wife and I like the fresh, dirty produce we can wash off ourselves," he said. "Plus I get to ask questions."

He feels free to inspect fresh tomatoes intimately without fear of reproach, in a way not possible at the grocery store a few blocks away; and he has an owner or farmer right there to answer questions.

For most, coming to the market is also a community event, or a chance to get fresh air and check out the produce, fresh flowers and baked goods.

"It's fun," said Brenda Hanak, who brought palm and fruit trees from D & B Nursery in Port Charlotte. "You meet a lot of nice people at farmers' markets."

Some customers meandered in flip-flops or on bikes, eyeing Ralph's Seafood, with coolers full of fresh gulf shrimp, grouper, snapper and more; or they discovered fragrant bouquets of flowers at Al "the flower guy" Niemczyk's tent.

His wife Kate Niemczyk said moving the market out from under the U.S. 41 bridge by Centennial Park, and into the parking lot on Edwards Drive a few



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Shoppers congregate at the Cape Harbour Farmers' Market near some of vendor Rod Fritschie's lychee fruit (red, in the foreground.)



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

: It's too hot and humid to grow many items during the summer in Florida, but these peppers were shipped straight from the next best place, Georgia, and unloaded at the Immokalee State Farmers' Market.

blocks away, hurt business.

"A lot of people can't walk as far down here on their lunch breaks," she said.

They also are more likely to get rained out. Market manager Michaelene Beaudin said they relocated due to the downtown street beautification project, and are looking forward to reclaiming the spot under the bridge.

"During season, there are a lot more vendors," she said. "I have about eight vendors right now...I can't wait to get them back under the bridge, too."

She said the morning is usually the best time to come now, "because the heat actually affects the flowers and the veggies."

Another vendor, Joanne Matonak, sold peanut butter cookies for dogs, which she bakes at home in North Fort Myers. Matonak and her husband only appear at local markets like those in Fort Myers

and Cape Coral, but sometimes get calls from out-of-state buyers who went north for the summer.

Along with radishes, cabbages, plums and much more, okra was on display under farmer Horace Brittain's tent last Thursday. It's one of the only summer crops aside from black beans and swiss chard, that he harvests on a 40-acre spread near Alva.

Brittain gets up at 4 a.m. to make it downtown, and has been coming since the market opened there 14 years ago; he is also found at the Fort Myers State Farmers' Market. With a worn, red complexion, white hair and frozen blue eyes, he might have come from the novel, "The Grapes of Wrath."

"This country is in a depression," he said. "Call it what you want, but it's here...I did not get back what I had in my eggplant crop this spring."

Cape Harbour

The Cape Coral Farmers' Market at Cape Harbour draws crowds of all ages each Saturday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. (A children's storytelling hour commences from 11 a.m. to noon)

The Cape Coral Market will re-open in October in its old spot on 47th Terrace, said vendor Rod Fritschie, owner of Au Natural produce; but for the summer he helped bring many fellow vendors to the Harbour at the south end of Chiquita Boulevard, which includes other retail shops and a tiki bar.

"You've got 150,000 residents in Cape Coral that live here year round," he said. "You need a farmers' market."

Fritschie owns 56-acres of groveland and manages more than 300 acres of farmland divided throughout Port Charlotte, Bonita Springs and Lehigh Acres. Some of his acreage is reserved for organic