



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

: Peaches from Georgia are sold to a customer Thursday morning at the Fort Myers Downtown Farmers' Market. The market temporarily moved to Edison Avenue across from Harborside Event Center because of street construction.



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Come fall, the Immokalee State Farmers' Market will be bustling with vendors and customers. In the summer, however, there is still a lot of good produce, such as new potatoes and mangos, to be had at the New Market Road market.



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A farmers' market on Bayshore Road in North Fort Myers will reopen when cooler, dryer days resume.

farming. And he's always there for specific questioning about growing method.

He sells what he can in the summer and likes to bring "odd stuff" to the market in the winter. Some of his crops include yellow and white peppers, tropical fruits such as guava, passion and lychee; four types of banana; onions, potatoes and jicama. Mangos and avocados just came in recently, he said.

Yulia Romanova was at the Harbour visiting friends, and got the opportunity to sample the sweet, fragrant lychee fruit for the first time. Her verdict: "I like it."

Fort Myers State Farmers' Market

At the Fort Myers State Farmers' Market on Edison Avenue, The City Fish Market and Seafood Connection still offer the day's fresh catch. And farmer Brittain with his produce, plus other items like pickled eggs and big jars of candy, has had

a space at the State Market for 29 years.

Senior market manager Lee Crews took command of the property two years ago, and Brittain, who was not pleased with former management, called Crews "the best thing that ever happened to this market."

Crews, formerly a federal probation officer, has been working to clean up the grounds, in some cases with inmate labor, repair aging signage and repaint a new building.

It replaces the one built in 1945 that was ravaged by Hurricane Charley. The space was given its certificate of occupancy in May and will house wholesale vendors, who supply local stores with goods like flowers, produce and ice cream. Some of them sell to the public, too.

"It's getting to the point where I like to start showing off what we've got," Crews said.

At the Connection, "Whistling" Bill

and "Catfish" Bob will either steam your blue crabs Baltimore style or Cajun hot n' spicy; or wrap them up live. The male crabs are known for their claw meat, while the females are known for the body meat, Bill said.

City Fish also has one of the best lunch deals in town, Crews bragged: \$5 for two fried fish sandwiches. Try the flavorful mullet, or opt for one of many other "safer" choices like cod; it's served on a white bun with tartar sauce. You order inside, but it's a cramped space, so wait for it at the pickup window.

(Tip: the lemonade is great with the fish.)

Fort Myers resident Londa Williams was at the market with her son Brylon, and friend Ezekiel Burger, for blue crabs. Williams said she buys seasoning at City Fish and steams the crabs at home. She came because of the "very nice people." Her son likes the crabs and the price is low.

The market also boasts the State Farmers' Market Restaurant, a full-service diner, which has been open more than 50 years. It serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, seven days per week.

The opposite of fast food

An international organization called Slow Food, dedicated to raising awareness about fresh, local ingredients, has been growing in Southwest Florida, said the group's Southwest Florida president Rose O'Dell King.

Local farmers, along with chefs like Harold Balink, owner of H2, and Shannon Yates, a veteran restaurateur and currently owner of Bacchus, have been enlisted since the program began in the area more than two years ago.

"Think of it as a community food movement," King said. "Because eating is a community act."

"In order to do this, you have to link everybody together into a circle, from the farmers, to you and I, to the restaurateur."

King added that because farmers' market offerings are generally fresher, they are not only tastier but more nutritious.

"There's no question that farmers' markets promote healthy eating especially when they are in low income places," she said.

Lee County agriculture extension agent Roy Beckford agreed.

"Nothing beats fresh," he said. "And of course if you can produce it locally and there is a market for the chefs...that connection between the two groups will

If you go

- >> **What:** Taste of Lee, an exhibition of commodities by chefs, farmers and other local food producers.
- >> **Where:** Riverside Community Center at 3061 E. Riverside Drive in Fort Myers.
- >> **When:** August 9 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.
- >> **Cost:** Free admission and parking
- >> **Info:** Door prizes, free samples of fresh tropical fruits and vegetables from Lee County farmers and creations by local chefs, produce on sale. Call (239) 533-7514.

AREA MARKETS (as of July 6)

- >> **Oakes Brothers Produce**
16758 McGregor Blvd.
Fort Myers
Open daily
- >> **Immokalee State Farmers' Market**
424 New Market Road East
Immokalee
Open daily
- >> **Bayshore Market**
5800 Bayshore Rd.
North Fort Myers
Open Saturdays
- >> **Fort Myers State Farmer's Market**
2744 Edison Avenue
Fort Myers
Open daily
- >> **Cape Coral Farmer's Market**
Cape Harbour At the far South end of Chiquita Blvd
Cape Coral
Open Saturdays
- >> **Ritchey's Produce**
1550 Palm Beach Blvd.
Alva
Closed until the fall, then open daily
- >> **Sarasota Downtown Farmers' Market**
Lemon Avenue from 1st Street
to Pineapple Avenue
Sarasota
Open Saturdays
- >> **Tamiami Produce in San Carlos Park**
19133 Tamiami Trail
Fort Myers
Open daily
- >> **James Stewart**
McGregor and School Street
Fort Myers
Open daily
- >> **Fleamasters Flea Market**
4135 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard
Fort Myers
Open Friday, Saturday and Sunday
- >> **Ortiz Flea Market**
1501 Ortiz Avenue
Fort Myers
Open Saturday and Sunday

be really vital to stimulating small farm development in this area."

Although farmers can't produce as much during the summer in Southwest Florida, King pointed out you can still find plenty of local offerings including some produce, gulf shrimp, locally produced honeys, and artisanal breads and pastries. And Beckford is helping teach local growers how to produce more in the summer: varieties of tomatoes and peppers, for example, hydroponic strawberries, blueberries, prunes, micro-greens and especially fresh herbs.

Ultimately, he said it's a benefit to just about everyone who eats, grows food or sells food.

"You have a constant weekly supplier who understands you, understands your needs," he said. "People who have certain diets looking for specialty items can get those commodities at farmers' markets... and if you look at the large picture, too, some people are very conscious about lessening their carbon footprint."

It's easy to see why, when you consider that an orange from California traveled a few thousand miles, while one from Florida might be from just down the street.

"Having people just think about where their food comes from, that's a big step forward," King said. ■