Fresh produce purveyors, fans eagerly greet new selling season

By JUDITH W. WINNE
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Tonia Conover of Haddon Township toted bundles of herbs, zucchini and asparagus Saturday at the Collingswood Farmers Market, the kickoff day for the open-air, 30-week market season.

"We come every week," said Conover, who was joined by her mother pushing her two children in a stroller. "We've been anxiously awaiting for it to open. I just like knowing (the produce) is from local farmers. I trust it. It's always good."

Community farmers markets are a growth industry in the Garden State. There was a 158 percent increase in community farmers markets from 2000 to 2006, three times the national rate, according to a recent report by the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton.

"Consumers are seeking local foods for purchase, and value an interaction with New Jersey farmers," said Lou Cooperhouse, center director, following the release of the report. "Communities are increasingly seeing farmers markets as a vehicle for local economic development, and farmers have found this to be an opportunity in which they can earn considerably greater income."

The report, "New Opportunities for New Jersey Community Farmers' Markets," said median revenue per day earned at the market for farmers responding to a survey was $863. Earnings varied greatly, from $25 to thousands per day.

There are more than 100 community farmers markets, from the urban bustle of Newark in the north to the small-town-feel of West Cape May in the south.

Farm markets fulfill many functions in the community, according to the report. They:

Serve as temporary town centers, attracting consumers to nearby shops.

Offer residents access to fresh farm produce.

Showcase New Jersey agriculture.
Promote healthy eating.

Boost farmers' retail income at a time when the wholesale market has become challenging for growers.

The primary reason for the growth is consumer demand, said Cooperhouse, of the Food Innovation Center, an organization that provides agricultural and food businesses with research, ideas and information. Cooperhouse called the markets "a win-win-win" for farmers, customers and communities.

The Collingswood Farmers' Market, now in its ninth year, pulsated with shoppers Saturday morning -- customers clutching cut flowers and croissants, kids grasping balloons, vendors hawking kettle corn, dahlias and cilantro.

Just off Haddon Avenue under the PATCO High-Speed Line, this is the South Jersey market observers often cite as a success story.

"In the beginning, they had to coax the farmers to sell at the farmers market," said Betsy Cook, market director. "Now, I get calls from farmers I just can't accommodate."

From early May to the Saturday before Thanksgiving, two dozen vendors hawk everything from French pastry to certified organic produce.

Cook, who grew up in Collingswood and bought a house in the borough a decade ago, believes the market is a key piece in the town's resurgence and her own financial future.

"Our house is now worth three times as much, and I do think the market played a part in the property-value increase," she said.

Farmer John Hurff of Wm. Shober & Sons Inc. sells at several community markets.

"The best one is Collingswood," said Hurff, who farms in Monroeville. "They have a lot of people. They buy a lot of stuff. It's phenomenal -- it's the only word I can come up with for Collingswood."

Hurff brings seasonal produce -- peaches and nectarines beginning in July, apples and apple cider in September -- and fresh, fruity salsa.

Mary Ann Jarvis of Springdale Farm, the last remaining farm in Cherry Hill, wakes up at 1:30 a.m. Saturdays just to make the cider doughnuts that are Springdale's signature treat at the market.

Jarvis said the market is a draw for Springdale's Collingswood-area customers who don't want to buck the traffic and drive to the east side of Cherry Hill. And while the market proceeds don't represent a hefty hunk of her farm's revenue, the market is a fun and friendly scene for Jarvis.
"It's very well promoted," she said. "And it's supported by the whole business community. It's very well rounded, in terms of the product mix."

Product mix, or variety, is a key factor.

"If you have five people selling the same lettuce, the vendors are not happy with that," said Susan Baltake, a volunteer who helped found the Haddonfield Farmers' Market, which begins its second season this week. "You want to have a variety with what you sell."

What is sold and where it's sold are as important as good weather (Rain typically drives traffic down).

Diane Holtaway, associate director of the Food Innovation Center, said one pork purveyor discovered what appeared to be a great market location only to realize the community included many observant Jews who didn't eat pork.

"You need to meet the demands of the consumer," said Holtaway. "That's first and foremost."

Those who know markets point out they offer up more than crafts, baked goods and local produce.

"It's really not only a place to buy food," said Holtaway. "It's so much more than that . . . They know who grew that tomato. You can't put a value on that. It's so meaningful today. And it's a two-way street. The vendors love it, too. It's the connection between the people enjoying their products. It's a real meaningful experience for them."

Urban Camden, far from South Jersey's fields of asparagus and lettuce, boasts five markets, including a large Friday market at Broadway and Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Linda Bocclair, director of operations for Area Health Education Committee, said the market is at the confluence of a transportation hub, including the PATCO station, and customer traffic has been good.

"Our goal is to help with community revitalization, to get people excited about their city, feel good about where they are and what's available," Bocclair said.

In Camden, establishing farmers markets has been as problematic as sprouting new businesses. Attracting farmers has been a challenge and so, too, is funding. There is an issue of affordability, too, for customers who don't qualify for government food supports, like the Women, Infant and Children program.

"Fresh produce is not cheap anywhere," said Bocclair.

In Woodbury, there have also been challenges.

Organizers shifted the market day from Saturday to Thursday afternoon, hoping to attract
employees in the county's seat and commuters.

Still, said Virginia Horn, coordinator of the borough's Neighborhood Preservation Program, "We're not there yet."

In Moorestown, there is a different sort of community farmers market, on a farm at Centerton and Hartford roads on county-owned land.

Dan Kennedy, coordinator of the county's Farmland Preservation Program, said the market and farm underscore the importance of New Jersey agriculture.

"It's about increasing the public's understanding of what great local products are available and (to) consider spending their dollars at these markets," Kennedy said.

For farmers, the community farmers market is often an opportunity to personally meet the clients who crave their peppers and squash.

"He just enjoys being able to have one-on-one with the customer," said Pam Hurff, wife of John, the Monroeville farmer. "It's very satisfying to him as a farmer . . . If John can't go to Collingswood (and here Pam Hurff chuckled), he's upset for two days. It's been a real good experience for us."

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