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TOURISM

Redland Tropical Trail pushes agrotourism

Tourists in South Florida have a new destination -- the Redland Tropical Trail -- where they can experience South Florida's unique agricultural legacy.

By Daniel Shoer-Roth

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Tourists come to Miami for the fun, the fashion and . . . the farms?

A group of farmers and farm-related businesses in the Redland and Florida City are trying to bring a different kind of tourism to South Florida: agrotourism. They have created the Historic Redland Tropical Trail, a route of nine attractions in Miami-Dade's agricultural zone that officially opens next month.

The hope is that some of the millions of travelers who make annual pilgrimages to the Keys and Everglades National Park will venture off U.S. 1 and check out their vineyards, bonsai gardens, plantations of exotic fruits, orchid nurseries and even an alligator farm.

"We are neither the Mandarin Hotel nor the Four Seasons. We're just a minuscule group of home businesses," said Peter Schnebly, the owner of Redland's Winery, a producer of tropical fruit wines.

The opening of the trail comes at a time when the agricultural sector in the southern region of the county is going through a rough patch. The price of land has soared, hurricanes have devastated crops and housing developments are competing ferociously for the same real estate.

That's why agrotourism represents a diversified way to stay afloat, said Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau. Otherwise, the industry runs the risk of shrinking.

"Agrotourism is an excellent way to bring together our two principal industries: tourism and agriculture," she said.

The initiative aims to give farmers the chance to sell their crops directly to the public and to teach visitors that -- despite the urban jungle of condos in downtown Miami -- the county still has an agricultural industry.

Robert Fuchs, the charismatic owner of the fruit orchard Robert Is Here, used to recommend to his customers that they visit R. F. Orchids, the largest grower of orchids in South Florida, or the Everglades Alligator Farm and other tourist spots.

"I would send people to them, and they would send people to me. So, we said to each other: 'Why don't we join forces and draw a map with a route that helps the visitors find each place with ease?' " Fuchs recalled.

Of 40 businesses in the Redland that expressed interest in the project, only eight were willing to contribute \$5,000 each for the initial capital. Joining the fruit orchard, winery, orchid nursery the alligator farm were Coral Castle, Bonsai Garden, Monkey Jungle, and Capri Restaurant, which dispenses its neighbors' products. The botanical garden County Fruit & Spice Park was included as a courtesy.

Tobby Wesson, a tourist from New Jersey who marveled at the sight of Bob Freer facing down the reptiles at the Alligator Farm, said the circuit is ripe for development.

"When one visits Miami or Fort Lauderdale, one sees only one half of Florida's beauty. The other half is here: the habitat, the topography, the animals, none of which is found in South Beach," Wesson, 64, said.

More information is available at www.redlandtrail.com.