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FRUIT AND SPICE PARK

A PASSION FOR FRUIT

Tropical fruits were the big draw at the tropical ag fiesta.

By Stephanie Rodriguez

sbrodriguez@MiamiHerald.com

Tropical fruit grower Trent Swigert goes to the Tropical Ag Fiesta every year to support local growers and to see the wide variety of mangoes, his favorite fruit.

"When you think of the tropics, you think of mangoes," said Swigert, who lives in Homestead.

So how does he *really* feel about the delectable, juicy fruit?

"Eating mangoes is better than sex," he said.

Swigert was among about 1,000 visitors who attended the two-day festival last weekend. The event, established more than 75 years ago as a mango festival, was held at the Fruit and Spice Park at 24801 S.W. 187th Ave.

Organizers said the fiesta is designed to showcase agricultural produce harvested in summer's peak season. It also featured plant sales, gardening tips, lectures, grafting demonstrations, food booths, park tours and children's activities.

Cooks looking for tips visited the cooking demonstration tent, where South Florida chefs prepared tropical fruit recipes, and botanical experts were on hand to display and discuss tropical and exotic fruits and vegetables.

"Through fruits and plants you can expose your children to different cultures," said Ivan Torres Hidalgo of Palmetto Bay. "It's very important that we keep this going in South Florida because we need to preserve the lineage of these trees."

Torres said he enjoys the festival because he loves growing tropical fruits.

"I want to be able to have guanabana ice cream," he said, pointing to a list of ice cream flavors for sale by Gaby's Farm, a Homestead vendor that sells gourmet tropical fruit ice cream.

Torres's daughter Yasmine, a second-grader at Coral Reef Elementary, chose the Mango Passion Melange ice cream.

"It's yummy," she said after tasting it. "Mango is my favorite fruit."

Also a big draw: litchis.

Connie and Cliff Julian of Coral Springs bought litchi tea from vendor Krystal Folino.

"We've never tried it before and it smelled great," Cliff Julian said.

Folino said instead of selling tropical fruits seasonally, she figured out a way to market litchis year-round.

Her business, Luscious Lychees, uses the fruit to make chili sauce, vinegar, syrup for martinis and mixed drinks and jam.

"People joke with us and say we're litchi nuts," she said.

Folino said litchis are rare in the United States and that most Americans don't know what they are. "It has the consistency of a grape, but is sweeter," she said.

Sweet tastes were popular at Monica Mejia's booths. Mejia, of Homestead, sold all types of fruit-flavored wine, including carambola, guava, mango, passion and litchi.

"We don't use any grapes for our wine," she said.

Marika Horvath of South Miami said she bought the wine because it is different than anything she's ever tasted.

"It's sweet enough and perfect," she said.

Along with the sweet, there was room for something spicy: Chef Alex Patout of New Orleans gave away chicken gumbo samples.

He used an okra variety that he said is grown only in Louisiana.

"I brought it down here so hopefully I can meet some farmers who would be interested in growing it," he said.

Patout said he plans to open a restaurant in Coconut Grove to be named Christa Belle's Quarter, where he will cook many of his old-fashioned recipes.

"I started this three years ago and I just wanted to bring Louisiana to Miami," he said. "Many chefs want to cook modern, but I'm going the other way."

The festival also featured plants, trees and flowers.

LariAnn and Delia Garner said they attend every year to sell their rainbow eucalyptus trees, which come from the Philippines.

Connie Julian said the trees are her favorites.

"It's the most unique thing," she said. "The bark looks like pastel paints of all colors are dripping down it."

At another booth, Marcia Artiles of Princeton was selling orchids. She said hurricanes Wilma and Katrina wiped out 80 percent of her stock, but she continues to hope for the best.

"It's not everyday that you get to do something you love," she said.