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AGRICULTURE

Defending a way of life

As more homes and businesses go up, farmers fight to hold on to their heritage

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When Neal Spencer's grandfather began to farm in Homestead 40 years ago, most people passing by the city saw it as a U-pick stop on the way to the Florida Keys.

But over the past four years, a development boom has brought new residents and businesses to Homestead, eating up farmland for urban growth.

Encroaching suburban development is the latest foe that farmers have had to battle. Mostly, they've dealt with the weather and fluctuating markets.

For third-generation farmer Spencer, 28, and dozens of Homestead-area families, the ongoing struggle to preserve a beloved way of life is worth it.

'FARMING HAS A CHANCE'

"Farming was something I knew I was going to do for the rest of my life," said Spencer, who owns Bayside Tree Farms with business partner Michael Finocchiaro, 30, a second-generation farmer. "As long as there is enough land and as long as people allow the tractors on the road, I think farming has a chance in Homestead."

More than cultivating the snap beans, squash, cucumbers and winter tomatoes that have built South Florida's reputation as the nation's "salad bowl," farmers continue to tend to Homestead's agricultural heritage, which is older than the city.

Incorporated in 1913, Homestead is the second oldest city in Miami-Dade County. But the South Miami-Dade area opened to homesteaders in 1898, and farmers began to work on turning the area into the country's "winter basket."

When Henry Flagler decided to extend his railroad to Key West in 1904, farmers were able to transport fruits and vegetables easily to Miami and other parts of the state. Many workers who helped build the railroad stayed in the area and became the founders of the city after the Overseas Railroad was completed in 1912.

Today, small farms of row crops sit next to new housing developments and busy roadways. Large tree farms and nurseries are visible just beyond the city limits.

Miami-Dade County agricultural manager Charles Lapradd said Homestead and its surrounding areas -- home to a significant segment of the county's agricultural production -- are still ideal locales for vegetable growth and ornamental agriculture.

With a year-round subtropical climate and nutrient-rich soil, Homestead contributes heavily to the county's \$1 billion agricultural industry, according to statistics in a 2002 study by the University of Florida.

Lapradd said that while there will always be a place for agriculture in Miami-Dade, farmers have always had to adjust to a changing landscape.

A rise in aquaculture in the area and establishment of a new winery in nearby Redland symbolize such change.

'MOVE AND ADAPT'

Farming in Homestead "doesn't look the same as it did 80 years ago or 50 years ago," Lapradd said. "It doesn't even look like it did 15 years ago. You have to move and adapt to the changing marketplace."

Spencer agreed.

"My grandfather started farming in 1966 with 10 acres of vegetables," Spencer said. "In the 1980s, he became a green-bean and potato grower."

A dip in the market in the late 1990s prompted his family to get out of the vegetable business, leading him to try a different angle to farming.

"In 2000, I got into the nursery business," Spencer said. "We started with containers and evolved into a field operation of native and flowering trees."

The reason that he and Finocchiaro were able to succeed, Spencer said, was that they own the land they farm.

'I ENJOY WHAT I DO'

With the construction boom, many small growers who have been leasing land for years to cultivate crops have suddenly found themselves without land when the property owners sold their farms to developers for big profits.

"We've had offers for our land," Spencer said. "But I enjoy what I do."

Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau, sees reason for hope for the future of farming in the city.

"One of the encouraging things is that we have quite a few young farmers," Edwards said. "Some are taking the reins from their parents or starting anew. I think that alone says that farming is not done here in Dade County. The future of this industry is in their hands."