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SOUTH MIAMI-DADE

FRUITS OF LABOR

Local growers are scouring the earth in search of new fruits in an effort to keep agriculture alive in south miami-dade.

By Kyle Bailey

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South Miami-Dade farmer Roger Washington was visiting Costa Rica about eight years ago when he first saw it: a red, spine-pocked fruit surrounded by feathery white petals that bore an uncanny resemblance to the mythical creature from which it got its name -- dragon fruit.

"I always try to grow stuff that no one else has," said Washington, who recognized the potential market for the exotic treat and created the Red Dragon Fruit Co.

The fruit is part of a blooming specialty-crop industry in South Miami-Dade, where the Dade County Farm Bureau hosted a media tour of four local fruit growers and packers Thursday.

Washington's signature fruit is sold mainly to gourmet markets and is also available online.

"We get orders all the time: Wisconsin, New York, everywhere," he said.

Washington said he would like to brand his variety of dragon fruit because of lesser-quality products on the market, and he's constantly searching for different varieties of the plant to introduce new tastes to the industry.

"It never stops," he said. "I always want something bigger and better."

Other South Miami-Dade farmers are importing specialty crops while continuing to grow the staples.

Holding a sack of freshly picked sweet potatoes being prepared for export, Jessie Capote, vice president of J&C Tropicals in Southwest Miami-Dade, said: "This is the pride and joy of the company, our bread and butter."

Established in 1965 by Cuban immigrants Nibaldo Capote and Severo Jorge, J&C Tropicals got its start growing such root crops as yuca and malanga.

The company has 700 acres dedicated to sweet potatoes alone.

But as the industry adapts to the increasing development of farmland, Capote said he and other farmers are increasingly turning to specialized fruits. Eighty percent of the company's operation is derived from imports, including such tropical fruits and vegetables as tamarind, coconut, ginger, guava, mango and mamey.

Another South Miami-Dade fruit grower, Schnebly Redland's Winery, has found other creative ways to sustain agriculture in the area.

In addition to growing and importing fruit and making wine, the company hosts winery tours and tasting parties to encourage consumption of its tropical fruit wines.

The winery is constructing a \$1.5 million tasting room that will cover 5,000 square feet and accommodate more than 250 visitors.

Washington, Schnebly and Capote all expressed their passion for agriculture, as well as the fear of its possible demise in South Miami-Dade.

Capote reflected the sentiments of all the growers when asked what his favorite fruit was.

"I don't have any favorites. They're like children; I love them all," he said.