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## **Fresh Profit**

### **South florida farmers see a boom in demand for organic products**

**By Susan Salisbury**

**Palm Beach Post**

As the market for organic produce expands from health food stores to mainstream groceries, farmers are taking notice.

While no statewide records are kept on organic production, Florida farms devote an estimated 12,000 acres to organic cultivation of rice, citrus, watercress, blueberries, mangoes and avocados, said Marty Mesh, executive director of the Florida Organic Growers Association. And organic farming is exploding in Southwest Florida, according to Gene McAvoy, a Hendry County-based extension agent.

"It used to be the organic farmer was an ex-hippie kind of guy who ate tofu burgers," said McAvoy. "The new guys are doing it for profit while they adhere to organic principles."

Gabriele Marewski runs a five-acre farm in Homestead that grows greens, edible flowers and other organic produce for 22 restaurants in South Florida, including Emeril's and Lowes Hotel.

Since starting Paradise Farms seven years ago, Marewski said she has seen business boom along with the growing demand for all things organic. Whole Foods recently purchased her entire avocado harvest, and she often finds herself fending off individuals who stop by in search of organic produce.

"If you're going to put me in the paper, make sure to say I don't sell retail," Marewski said.

#### **ORGANIC EARS**

In Palm Beach County, Alderman Farms, a conventional family-owned vegetable grower known for its peppers, began selling its first organic produce -- sweet corn grown in Loxahatchee -- in November. Tom Wilson, sales manager at Alderman Farms Sales west of Boynton Beach, said the certified organic bicolor corn is the first corn of its kind produced in Palm Beach County, the nation's top sweet corn-producing county.

"We are just trying to fill a niche here," Wilson said. "It was something new. It seems like a natural progression. It used to be people would order 10 of this and 20 of that. Now the orders are more substantial."

So far, the extra effort, such as having to produce the corn on land that has not been treated with any prohibited chemicals for three years, is worth it: The organic corn is bringing as much as three times the price of nonorganic corn.

Alderman is also marketing organic grape tomatoes and organic cabbage, Wilson said.

Ramkrishnan Balasubramanian, program director of Quality Certification Services, an organic certification agency in Gainesville, confirmed that Alderman Farms is one of 110 Florida producers, processors and livestock producers that have met strict requirements to qualify as organic agriculturists.

In Miami-Dade County, for example, there are fewer than a dozen certified organic growers. And Broward County only has a handful.

Darrin Parmenter, a vegetable extension agent based in West Palm Beach, said growing corn organically in South Florida, with its subtropical climate so conducive to a wide variety of pests and diseases, has been thought of as just about impossible.

"We don't have a frost period when pests and diseases disappear. They flourish year-round," Parmenter said.

Ronnie Blumenthal, director of development at Sarasota-based Global Organics Specialty Source, the largest organic produce distributor in the Southeast, distributes Alderman's corn. He said the product is sold to retailers such as Carmine's Gourmet Market in Palm Beach Gardens, health food stores and through consumer buying clubs.

Carmine's produce manager, Randy Sabatino, said the biggest problem he has seen with organic corn has been that some of it arrives with worms, and Carmine's discards those ears. Carmine's sells the organic corn at \$3.69 for two ears, compared to four ears of nonorganic corn at \$2.19.

## **PEST CONTROL**

Blumenthal acknowledged that organic corn does occasionally have worms. Unlike conventional corn, it is not sprayed with insecticides that kill them.

"Our sales director told me, 'Be glad. That shows this is a living, nutritious product,' " Blumenthal said.

For consumers such as Andrea Mass, 38, an administrative assistant who lives in Palm City, health and flavor concerns come first. As a member of the Miami-based Organic

Buying Club of South Florida, she receives a 30-pound share of fruits and vegetables every other week.

Members pay \$43 for a share with 15 or more items such as oranges, green beans, sweet potatoes, onions and garlic, but Mass receives hers free in exchange for being host of a 15-member group.

"The food is better. It is less expensive than buying it at the store," she said. "It's fresh, and it's abundant. It tastes delicious."

*Miami Herald staff contributed to this report.*