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BOYNTON BEACH

Squash blossoms putting bloom on farm's income

There seems to be no blooming way to figure out what's going to be trendy. Would you have thought it would be squash blossoms?

By Kimberly Miller

Palm Beach Post

For years, squash blossoms were just a pretty byproduct of farmer Nancy Roe's harvest, allowed to melt away after a few hours in the afternoon sun.

But now she sells the blooms for as much as \$1.25 each, and University of Florida researchers are helping her maximize a crop that has become a popular item in haute cuisine.

"We probably make as much on the flowers as we do on the squash," said Roe, who owns Farming Systems Research and operates Green Cay Produce west of Boynton Beach.

"They're hard to find around here."

Roe and UF horticultural researcher Russell Nagata, who is based near Belle Glade, began tinkering with squash blossoms two years ago to find what plants yield the most and biggest flowers.

UF RESEARCH

Part of UF's mission in its Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is to keep local and family farms in the community by helping them grow alternative or more sustainable crops.

Nagata said while there is a market for squash blossoms -- The Breakers Hotel and Resort in Palm Beach can order up to 300 in one shot -- there was no data on how to most efficiently farm them.

The squash blossom research included testing zucchini, pattypan and pumpkin for their flower yield.

Nagata measured flower size, volume and durability while Roe took daily blossom counts.

While pumpkins had some of the biggest flowers, Roe said zucchini are favored for their texture and medium size.

Roe sells male flowers for 75 cents each and the female flowers, which are attached to a baby squash, for \$1.25 each. They have to be picked in the morning and shipped before the end of the day.

Each week, Roe sells between two and five boxes of flowers, each with 32 blossoms.

CHEFS' FAVORITE

But when The Breakers is having a blowout, chefs will order them by the hundreds.

"They are a great product and really good when they have a crispy coating and a tender filling," said Anthony Sicignano, who is executive chef of restaurants for The Breakers.

Sicignano likes to stuff the blossoms with a goat cheese mixture, or a crab filling and then fry them in a tempura batter.

He said he grew up eating squash blossoms, which are common in Italian cuisine.

Roe doesn't plan on expanding her squash blossom crop because, for now, it's still a niche product.

But Sicignano said the blooms are becoming more popular and may eventually work their way onto his everyday menus.

"I'm surprised at the trendiness and the amount of interest," he said.

"More people should try them."