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HOMESTEAD

## Agri-tour a learning experience

**A tour of farms and nurseries that comprise South Miami-Dade's agricultural industry gave guests a look into how their fruits and vegetables are grown.**

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When Mike Olon told co-workers he would be picking up some fresh vegetables, they thought he was heading to a Publix. None of them knew he would visit farm country in South Miami-Dade County.

"Every year we come away [thinking] it's a very pleasant experience," said Olon, 52, of Kendall, who joined about 90 people for the Dade County Agri Council's annual agricultural tour and luncheon Wednesday.

Olon, a detective with the state Fire Marshal's office, took the day off to take his mother, Helen Olon, 84, to the featured farms and nurseries. It was his fourth tour and her sixth.

"I love it," said Helen Olon, a Miami retiree. "You know people in the city don't even know what we have in the area."

The group filled three chartered buses for a 5 ½-hour tour that showcased farming's contribution to the county.

"We want to educate the public about what is going on in South Dade," said Diane Massucci, secretary for the Agri Council. "Agriculture is changing, but we would like to preserve it. You can't get dinner from a concrete slab."

Along for the ride were teachers, retirees, elected officials, farmers and students, all eager to learn more about row crops, tropical fruits, horticulture and aquaculture -- the farming of fish for consumption or fish collectors.

The tour included stops at a nursery, agricultural research center, packing house, tomato field and tropical fish farm.

At Angel's Hatchery in Homestead, orange-speckled koi up to 18 inches long darted around a man-made lagoon, dazzling tour takers with their brilliant colors and size.

Guides from the Miami-Dade County Extension service offered historical tidbits, geography lessons and insight into the agriculture industry's efforts to deal with economic downturns.

Joe Garofolo of the University of Florida/Miami-Dade County Extension service said when a crop becomes diseased -- as in citrus with canker -- "it affects more than just the growers."

At Gulfstream packing house, tour members saw empty boxes lined up on conveyor belts, waiting for workers to wash, wax and box tomatoes for shipping.

Miami-Dade Commissioner Katy Sorenson, who represents District 8, including portions of South Miami-Dade, said while touring, "It was imperative for me to see how viable these industries are."

Suzette Rice, who works for Mayor Carlos Alvarez at the South Miami-Dade Government Center, said she attends the event every year.

"I think this tour brings out all the things people don't know about agriculture," she said. "It's like a big secret people get to see."

The final stop -- at a tomato field in Homestead, where visitors were able to pick tomatoes off the vine -- turned into a lesson in honesty when Miami-Dade police showed up for a mock sting operation.

"Do you know what you're doing?" officers barked at unsuspecting tomato pickers as they stuffed bags with beautiful, sun-ripened tomatoes.

It was all part of the experience: Police and the Dade County Farm Bureau are working together to educate the public about produce stealing.

"Some people show up on a Sunday afternoon with a plastic bag and go shopping [in the fields]," the farm bureau's Jennifer Parsons said.

The "sting" caught the tourists by surprise.

"That's all I needed now -- to get arrested!" said a laughing Tony Castellanos, 55, of Miami.

Castellanos, who took the tour with his wife and daughter, said it gave him a glimpse of a slowly dying part of South Florida.

"It worries us that [farming] is disappearing," Castellanos said.

During the luncheon, the Agri Council recognized two South Miami-Dade agriculture pioneers: Robert McMillan and Nat DeLeon. Gaylon Parton, who teaches agriculture at William H. Turner Technical High School, was also recognized.