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## AGRICULTURE

### Cultivating a heritage

**Although being squeezed from all sides, agriculture in and around Homestead remains a South Miami-Dade staple.**

BY MONICA HATCHER

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It was 1936 when John Alger's grandfather moved to Homestead to start growing snap beans.

Although a relative latecomer among farmers, some of whom began cultivating land in the area in the late 1800s, the Alger family, now one of the largest growers in Homestead, has fought and triumphed over farming's perennial adversaries: the weather, volatile markets, and now, encroaching suburban development.

But for the Algers and dozens of Homestead-area families like them, the ongoing struggle to preserve a beloved way of life is worth it.

"We just love it. The money hasn't been that great, so if you didn't love it, you'd be out of it," Alger said.

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

Small farms of row crops sit amid new housing developments and along busy roadways.

Large tree farms and nurseries are visible just beyond the city limits.

Homestead and its surrounding areas, home to a significant portion of Miami-Dade County's agriculture 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 agriculture industry, according to statistics in a 2002 study by the University of Florida.

While there will always be a place for agriculture in Miami-Dade County, said Teresa Olczyk, an agent with the Miami-Dade County Extension Office, which studies and promotes agriculture in the area, farmers are having to adjust to a changing landscape -- a suburban one.

"The industry is in a transition. Some farmers are adapting by changing what they do. They go into ornamental agriculture, or they reduce their acreage," Olczyk said.

Ray Gilmer, executive director of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, which represents growers in legislative matters, said growth doesn't necessarily spell doom for those wishing to

stay in the business.

“The more houses that are being built, the more nursery plants they need, so that is one part of agriculture that benefits from the housing boom.”

The Algers hedged their bets on that premise in the 1980s when they diversified their crops to include a tree farm. It worked.

But not everyone had the resources or foresight to do the same.

A small grower whose family has been leasing land to cultivate snap beans since the 1930s, Charles “C” Jones said the construction boom has all but put him out of business.

“I started last year with 20 acres, now I’m down to four,” Jones said. “I can’t make a living on four acres. This is my last year [farming] here.”

And, he said, switching to ornamental agriculture isn’t as easy as it sounds.

“Do you know how long it takes to grow a tree?” he asked.

Jones considers himself one of the last holdouts among small growers. Many landowners have chosen to sell their farms for dizzying profits.

“Ten years ago an acre would have gotten \$5,000 or \$6,000. Today an acre will go for \$50,000, \$60,000 and more,” Gilmer said.

Alger said he sometimes questions his sanity when he resists the temptation to sell, but tradition forges strong bonds.

“My grandfather did this, my dad did this and I have a son who wants to continue,” Alger said. “So, somehow, in some fashion, I’m going to continue.”