

# South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

## The farmers among us the farmers among us

By Jaideep Hardikar Photos Sarah Dussault  
August 30, 2009

Look around, and you may find alternatives to supermarkets: A small farm, maybe plowed by a neighbor, that will provide you with palate-pleasing, farm-to-kitchen fresh food that will change how you perceive, and taste, your dinner.

Internet-savvy, the new small farmers are enterprising and innovative. They are building new partnerships — among themselves, with farmers' markets, restaurants or directly with consumers. So, just as they seemed lost in history, small farms are bouncing back and, experts say, "re-invigorating" America's local food system — slowly but surely. Bolstered by growing consumer awareness, these farms are putting a wide range of field-fresh produce, fish and cheese back on dining tables. "It's happening one person at a time," said John Ikerd, author of *Sustainable Capitalism* and former professor at the University of Missouri. "In 2050, this will be seen as a historic time that witnessed historic processes."

The emerging small farm industry became clear in the 2007 U.S. agriculture census. While farming in the past decade witnessed a concentration of large and corporate farms as traditional mid-sized farms bowed out, micro-farms, generally growers less than 20 acres, also emerged. Between 2002 and 2007, the agriculture census shows, 291,329 new farms opened in the United States. Most of them were small farms in size and value.

Florida is no exception, the 2007 data indicated. Overall, 93 percent of the state's 47,000-plus farms are categorized as "small farms," defined by the USDA as having annual gross revenue of \$250,000 or below.

However, more than half of the total farms in the state are actually very, very small in size, with annual sales value of less than \$5,000. "Two-thirds are hobby farms," said Bob Hochmuth, Small Farmers Coordinator at the UF-IFAS. But one-third of new small farmers, he said, are in with a long-term commitment.

At a small farms summit in Kissimmee early this month, the profile of the Florida small farmer surfaced. A good percentage of those in attendance were women, Hispanic and black.

Who are these farmers among us? A few intros:

*A link to the past and future*

Sixty-seven years. That's how long Lantana's Henry Williams has been a farmer.

"It's just something," said Williams, 78, clad in his signature blue-jean overalls and a cap. "I can't get away from the farm."

Every other day, he drives to the two-acre farm he leases, cuts okra, now in season, and brings it home in bushels. "Customers buy it as soon as I cut it."

Who are his customers? His neighbors. Williams, a preacher on Sundays, has seen it all: Cities grew and consumed farmlands. New technologies forced others out. He stayed put.

"Farming", he said, "made me a somewhat better person."

Williams gave up schooling when he was 11 to tend to his 120-acre family farm in Alabama. "It's not easy to be a black farmer," he said. "Not easy to get land or credit."

He moved in 1952 to [Delray Beach](#), where he kept farming while managing a construction business.

Fifty-seven years later, he's still tilling land.

Williams sees the recession as an opportunity. "It will stop farmlands from becoming real estate developments. We'll be able to produce food."

Williams, a father of nine, doesn't heed his wife's advice to retire.

"I love seeing my plants grow," he said. "I will farm until God calls me to him."

#### *The Ph.D. farmer*

Nancy Roe, 60, and husband Charlie, 62, work hard to keep their 10-acre farm innovative and enterprising. Rows of soil beds covered with plastic sheets hold the crops and keep weeds out. Drip irrigation waters the plants, and lowers the utility bill.

In addition to farmers markets and local restaurants, the Roes sell their vegetables to about 400 households that pay upfront to have their produce delivered in boxes. Usually, the household consumers enroll online around August, at the launch of a new season.

The Roes started preparing the farm in late July for the coming season. By doing so, they can provide fresh produce — potatoes, squash, peppers, okra, herbs and a range of vegetables — when other smaller competitors are not.

Drive west in [Boynton Beach](#), and you'll see a suburban community that sprouted from farmland. If you don't know the Roes are there, you'd miss them.

Roe first worked the farm in the early 1990s while earning her Ph.D. in horticulture. Today, she typifies a national trend of a rising number of women farm operators, who comprised more than a million of the 3.3 million farm operators, the 2007 agriculture census showed. That's 30.2 percent, a 19 percent increase from 2002.

"People are far removed from their food supply," said Nancy. "They should know who grows their food and how it is grown."

#### *Organic farmers*

Each represents a different culture and cuisine. One thing binds them: organic farming.

"We also love good food," chuckled Hani Khouri, an MBA-turned-goat-farmer who is a member of Redland Organics, a collective of organic farmers in Homestead.

They also share a mission: educating people about small farms and non-processed, no-pesticide produce. So, today, the group of eight farms, less than 10 acres each, is leading peers in low-energy organic farming.

From peppers to tomatoes to baby greens to fruits to eggs to goat cheese and ice cream — their product line is diverse and growing.

Trusted customers drop in to buy, and to hide away from the city. Their lush green farms, replete with a variety of trees soaked in the fragrance of flowers and fruits, are always abuzz with the chirping of birds and insects.

"When we began organic farming 10 years ago, we were not considered real farms," said Margie Pikarsky of the Bee Heaven Farm, who founded the group. Now, more than 20,000 farms in the country, the 2007 agriculture census showed, are certified organic. Buying and sharing fertilizer, for example, through a collective basis saves them money. They can tap diverse markets — from farmers markets to retail and even wholesale. They can sell their produce year-round to consumers, commercial restaurants and regular folks who show up at farmers markets.

"We benefit from networking," said Gabriele Marewski, a Redland member who is adding mushrooms to her offering, "and by sharing our products."

#### *Hydroponic farmers*

They grow over 190 varieties of crops. But Jodi and Darrin Swank don't use soil to grow what they grow. Instead, a nutrient-rich water solution is pumped 24/7 into a greenhouse filled with plastic trays

used to grow greens.

If it sounds like something from a Disney movie, it is — sort of. Darrin, 42, saw a hydroponic farm model when he was 15 during a visit to EPCOT Center in Disney World.

Swank Specialty Produce in Loxahatchee is only a half-acre farm, but the Swanks envision expanding their hydroponic effort to 20 acres in the future. As farmland shrinks and demand for locally grown fresh food grows, the technology will be an answer, say the couple, who have been running this farm since 2003.

"You can produce more on less land with hydroponics," he said. "I plan to have my entire farm under hydroponics one day."

Hydroponic farm acreage in Florida grew from over 2.8 million square feet in 1991 to well over 4.1 million square feet in 2001, according to IFAS.

Who buys? The Swanks sell to hotels and restaurants through a group of chefs looking for local and fresh food. They also provide their produce to about 25 households who pay upfront and then have the produce delivered year-round.

"I never saw myself doing this," said Jodi, 44, a former travel consultant. "But now I enjoy farming.

#### *The fish farmer*

Andre and Sharon Fletcher took their first steps in farming last year, when their exotic pet fish business tanked with the economy. They quickly found a growing demand for tilapias, a freshwater delicacy that is common on restaurant menus.

Today, Andre, 51, and Sharon, 46, can pretty much educate aspiring fish farmers. One lesson: Don't overmedicate fish, or they will all die.

"We made mistakes and learned," said Andre. "It was not a good sight."

On their two-acre Fancy Koi 2 Homestead fish farm they bought in 2006, the Fletchers are writing a success story. They are adding customers. Revenues are steadily increasing. And they are eyeing new opportunities in seafood.

The first-ever survey of small farms in Florida conducted by IFAS this year found that nearly 60 percent of the 300-plus respondents were first-generation farmers. The Fletchers, though, had few options.

Andre's construction business has suffered in the recession. Sharon got laid off last year.

Now they tend full-time to the fish farm.

His farm is really a chain of circular tanks, with fresh water piped in. Each tank has tilapias of different sizes. The Fletchers are looking to diversify into farmed shrimp and lobsters, and switch to solar power to run their farm.

"The farm," they said in unison, "brought us closer."

#### **Meet the farmers**

They represent the new face of South Florida agriculture. Page 3

#### **See the farms**

Local farmers tell their stories. Go to [SunSentinel.com/farmers](http://SunSentinel.com/farmers)

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