

Sow, then reap

As spring begins, Shore-area farmers literally are laying the seeds for Harvest 2007.

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Seeds to seedlings, seedlings to fruit-bearing plants, freshly harvested produce ready for eating.

From farm to table: Supper's never better than when it's made with ingredients grown right here.

Right now in Monmouth and Ocean counties, farmers are sowing seeds, watering seedlings and otherwise nurturing the tomato and pepper, eggplant and watermelon, lettuce and leek, berry and cucumber plants that will grow into the vegetables and fruits you will snatch up at farm stands and markets later this spring, throughout the summer and into the fall. It's produce at its best: just-picked, ripe and economical, to boot, because you're buying directly from the farmer and not paying transportation costs.

More than that, local farmers stand ready to respond to local cooks' requests for favorite vegetables and fruits.

Debbie and Ross Clayton of Clayton Farm, Monmouth Road (Route 537), Freehold Township, this year are supplementing their regular lineup of sweet corn, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, melons, squashes and pumpkins with a bumper crop of new offerings.

"We're trying lemon cucumbers this year," Debbie Clayton says. That mild, juicy cuke just might appeal to fans of Clayton Farm's yellow watermelons or sweet miniature eggplants ("Great for stir-frying," Debbie says) or citrusy tomatillos. "Last year, we tried a number of heirloom tomatoes — we put their names out with them, so people would get to know them. My favorite is the Arkansas Traveler. And also the Radiator Charlie."

Though Ross Clayton laments that the "yield isn't quite there" for the sought-after heirloom varieties of tomatoes and that they can be "soft and perishable," they're the new darlings of adventurous home cooks and restaurant chefs. So from their canopy-covered wagon in front of their 147-acre farm, the Claytons will mix in the new with the tried-and-true for Harvest 2007.

"These specialty varieties, sometimes called the ethnic varieties, are something more and more people want," Debbie Clayton says.

Out in Plumsted, where the Hallock family farms along Fischer Road, Debbie Hallock Grover is monitoring the seedlings in the you-pick's expanse of greenhouses. The first crops that go into the ground — lettuces and cabbages — "were seeded a month ago," she says. Following them, providing spring's weather cooperates, the peppers, tomatoes and eggplants will go in. Next up will be the melons.

The Hallocks stagger their growing season, planting some 12 varieties of tomatoes over four different stretches of time. On their 300 acres in Plumsted, the Hallocks' crops range from early June's English peas and strawberries to October's squashes.

Serguei and Ludmila Ekimov are dedicated to trying new crops at their St. Petersburg Family Farm on Georgia Road in Freehold Township, where they grow produce for top restaurants in the state. They grow a range of eggplants, for instance — "white, many Asian, many Italian" — varieties, Ludmila Ekimov notes, and in addition to the classic Beefsteak, cherry and plum tomatoes her customers love, they're trying some heirlooms as well.

"We do herbs, too," Ekimov says. They grow the typical, including basil, mint, parsley and dill, but also the unusual, including willowy types of fennel. "We grow leeks, small, baby leeks, for the restaurants," she adds, "and lots of lettuces, loose-leaf lettuces, both red and green.

At the Krowicki Farm, on Route 539 in Plumsted, Christina Krowicki was busy last week helping her farmer-father Denis transplant tomato plants and seed lettuce in trays.

"We grow lots of oddball stuff," Christina Krowicki says, chuckling. "We've got the zebra-striped eggplant, which is a white and purple eggplant. We've got the neon purple eggplant, too. Orange tomatoes. A black-red tomato. Heart-shape tomatoes. Some of those heirloom tomatoes might not look too pretty, but they are great-tasting. My favorite is the "summer pinks' — they are sweeter than a regular tomato. And the different cherry tomatoes, too, in purple and in yellow."

It's that pumped-up flavor of the heirloom tomatoes that draws folks not only to the Krowickis' farm stand at their home base, but also to the summertime farmers' markets in Toms River, Lacey and Point Pleasant Beach where they sell their produce in season.

"We like going to the markets," Christina says. "It's satisfying to meet the customers, to share."

Chris DiGregorio, whose family's Freehold Township-based Twin Pond Farm sets up stands on Route 524 in Freehold Township as well as on Route 9 in Howell, also appreciates that farmer-client exchange. The DiGregorios, too, "are always trying new varieties," Chris DiGregorio says. "We even do prepared foods, made from our own produce, that we sell at our stands."

The Claytons make a habit of exchanging recipes and tips with their farm-stand customers. And they've learned something critical in return.

"People do need to taste that farm-fresh taste," Debbie Clayton says. "I think it's something they really appreciate."