

# Linking Delaware Farmers with Local Residents

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Initially established in 2015 as a partnership between the Delaware General Assembly and the state Department of Agriculture, Delaware Produce Week is aimed at facilitating a better relationship between farmers and local consumers.

This year's week-long observation (July 10-14) included a series of events highlighting the numerous ways Delawareans can connect with family farms in their communities.

State Rep. Lyndon Yearick, R-Dover South, who was raised on a dairy farm and is the creator of Delaware Produce Week, said there are a lot of benefits to encouraging "buy local, eat local" behavior. "Farms products often travel hundreds of miles from producer to plate," he said. "In some cases, like mangos, that's unavoidable. But in many instances, the fruits, vegetables, and meats that Delawareans want are being produced not far from their front doors. Fresher food translates into better nutrition, better taste, and the potential for better eating habits."

Delaware Agriculture Secretary Michael T. Scuse said more consumers are seeking out local food options. "They know that buying local means the best, freshest food out there," he said. "These trends are being driven by Delaware residents who have become more and more interested in where they get their food from. Increasingly, that means going local – either buying directly from a farmer or knowing that the food in their grocery stores comes from local family farms. People want that connection with their neighbors and nearby farms."

In recent years, Delaware food retailers like ShopRite, Redner's Warehouse Markets, and Walmart have reached out to local agricultural producers to form direct partnerships. More than 240 Delaware family farms grow fruits and vegetables.

Lt. Gov. Bethany Hall-Long joined Sec. Scuse, Rep. Yearick, and other state officials on July 10<sup>th</sup> at Fifer Orchards to read a proclamation officially launching Delaware Produce Week. The farm, west of Camden, was a fitting backdrop for the event because it illustrates many of the ways consumers can access local produce. In addition to being a major producer of Delaware peaches, the fourth-generation family business also includes a "U-pick" produce business, an on-site farm market, and a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

CSA programs occupy a small but intriguing niche of agriculture consumerism. Typically, customers purchase a share of a farm's seasonal production with boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables proportionally distributed to the shareholders at regular intervals during the growing season. "I've been part of this type of program before, and it's an interesting experience," Rep. Yearick said. "You hardly ever know exactly what's going to be in the

box, so there's an aspect of anticipation and discovery about it. And you often get exposed to produce you have not tried before, so it kind of motivates you to expand your palate and cooking skills."

Jessica Yocum, CSA Coordinator for Fifer Orchards, said their program began in 2011 with about 50 members. Today, 700 to 800 people participate annually. Three available options include a small box, serving one to two people, for \$25 a week; and a customizable larger box for \$39 that allows a family of four to select some of the products they will receive. The CSA program operates for about 25 weeks out of the year: 18 weeks during the late spring and summer, followed by a seven-week shoulder season in the fall.

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, Sec. Scuse and lawmakers got a firsthand perspective on another way to local farms and consumers can connect – a "U-Pick" operation. The group toured Bennett Orchards near Frankford, which allows visitors to harvest their own blueberries and peaches.

In a sense, the sixth generation family farm is reviving parts of Delaware's agricultural legacy. Blueberries and peaches were once widely grown in the state. In fact, during the latter half of the 19th Century, Delaware was the leading producer of peaches in the nation and was known as "The Peach State." A blight spread by insects caused the industry to collapse by the early 20th Century.

Blueberries were reportedly common in Delaware between the 1920s and 1980s but faded after this period. The Bennett Family saw an opportunity to try to revive blueberry production and in 2010 applied for a USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant to prepare the soil and buy plants. With about 6,000 productive blueberry bushes, the farm presently has one of the largest operations in Delaware.

Jim Bennett, co-owner of the farm, said the bulk of their peaches and blueberries are sold directly to the public but that the farm also supplies some local markets.

Delaware Produce Week concluded on July 14<sup>th</sup> as Lt. Gov. Hall-Long, State Rep. Earl Jaques, D-Glasgow, and New Castle Councilmen William Powers and David Tackett took a walking tour of a seasonal farmer's market operated in New Castle County's Glasgow Park. Farmer's markets are the essence of the "buy local-eat local" movement with most sales directly from producer to consumer. New Castle County government currently sponsors five seasonal markets. The one at Glasgow Park will be held every Friday through November 17<sup>th</sup>, between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.

According to the Delaware Department of Agriculture, there are over 80 on-site farmstands throughout the state and more than 20 farms that allow patrons to harvest their own fruits and vegetables. Last year, total sales at Delaware's 25 community-run farmers' markets topped \$2.9 million. About 45-percent of those sales were from products other than produce such as meats, cheeses, jellies, bread, salsa, eggs, and honey.

For photos of the 2017 Delaware Produce Week events, visit the DDA's Flickr site: <https://flickr.com/photos/51826084@N03/sets/72157682953565142>

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