

Blue Zones

“Those who think they have no time for healthy eating will sooner or later have to find time for illness.”

— Edward Stanley

Farmers are the unsung heroes of this pandemic



SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

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Despite the chaos and uncertainty that COVID-19 has caused in our daily lives, one thing has remained constant, even in the midst of the hoarding frenzy; our access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

According to Doug Baker of the Food Industry Association, the US food industry generally has 26 days worth of supply in the supply chain at any given time. However, in the first two weeks of March there was a 400% spike in food demand in the US. This resulted in the empty shelves seen in grocery stores across the country that triggered anxiety in consumers and spurred panic buying.

Simultaneously, our somewhat masochistic demand for post-apocalyptic movie streaming skyrocketed. As these scenarios of lack played out, whether in real life or on the flat screen, how many of us asked ourselves the question, “What would I do if there was no food?”

How many of us wouldn't have the slightest clue how to grow a garden, raise hens to lay eggs, or milk a cow? For many of us, every bite we put in our body comes from never seen and under-appreciated sources. But who ensures that this remains the case?

Enter the gracious, never tiring local farmer. Immunity boosting fresh pro-

duce has been hitting our local shelves every day offering us one of the best defenses against fear of scarcity from COVID-19.

During Q2 (which has just begun) and Q3 is when most of the produce in the US ripens and is harvested. This is also when the majority of migrant workers fill in approximately 258,000 positions via the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker Program to support farmers' yield. Visas for the program jumped 11% from 2018-2019. Still, 50% of the fruit and vegetables sold in the US come from Mexico.*

In Florida, over half, 52%, of the state's land use is dedicated to agriculture and the industry produces a 350% ROI in tax revenues for the state for every dollar invested. Yet the average US farmer is 60 years old and the next generation of farmers are not coming up to take the reigns, representing only 9% of the profession.*

The most likely cause? In Collier County, mirroring the national trend, 54% of farms make less than \$2500 per year and the average farmer can expect to make a net income of -\$11,265.* Assuredly, the farming industry is not selling itself as a viable career.

How can you help? There are several reasons for this system failure including outdated policy, limitations of the Farm Bill and availability of affordable land, but we will dive into these issues in subsequent articles.

COVID 19 SURVEY

Sharecare, Blue Zones Project's parent company, has developed a survey in partnership with Dr. Sandro Galea, Dean of the School of Public Health at Boston University, to understand our communities' well-being and behavior change during the COVID-19 pandemic. The more data, the more accurate the insights, the better we can help #Flatten-TheCurve. By completing the 5-minute survey, you can see how your actions and feelings about this crisis compare to others across the nation. Survey Link: <https://www.sharecare.com/covid19/survey>

For now, you can help by supporting your local farms and buying US produce wherever you can. Several local farms are presently selling produce online including Circle C Farm, Produce Buddies, Inyoni Organic Farm, Farmer Mike's U-Pick and Pollination Farm. Additionally, Coconut Point and Vanderbilt Farmer's Markets are still running on Thursdays and Saturdays, respectively.

Eat what's in season. You can find a list of seasonal produce here: <https://www.thespruceeats.com/florida-seasonal-fruits-and-vegetables-2217174>

Start a garden at home. Even small herb garden, a Tower Garden or a garden box will fit on your lanai or driveway if you don't have a backyard.

According to Kaitlyn Dillard, the Education Programs Manager at the Naples Botanical Gardens, “You can still grow some veggies in the summer heat. Collards, okra, and eggplant do well in the heat. We usually cover crop our beds with sweet potatoes beginning in May. Sweet potatoes prefer a 3-6 month season of heat and summer rains to grow. They also protect our beds from the harsh temps and weeds.”

More resources for planting can be found at <https://www.naplesgarden.org/stayplanted/>

The University of Florida IFAS Extension also offers the following helpful links:

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/vegetable-gardening-in-florida.html>
https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_vegetable_gardening
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>

Unquestionably, getting your hands dirty and growing your own garden will give you a better appreciation for our access to fresh produce and the people who are providing it. We are blessed to not have to rely on our own green thumbs to feed ourselves and now, more than ever, it is important to show our local farmers our gratitude and support.

*USDA Census of Agriculture – 2017

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