

What's In Season: Farmer's Markets!

Written by Laura Von Harten

Spring is here, so the farmers markets of the Lowcountry are back in business. And with the recent surge in enthusiasm for fresh, local foods, business is better than ever.



Keep in mind that the farmers market managers are serious about this local farm stuff. You will not find cartons of mushy muskmelons that some middleman trucked down from Columbia. There is a strict vendor application process, so you'll be assured you're getting real Lowcountry-grown fruits and vegetables produced by real Lowcountry farmers. Here's the schedule:

Tuesdays, 2 pm–6 pm

Port Royal Farmers Market (starting April 29) Anchor Park, Paris Avenue, near Port Royal Elementary

Thursdays, 8 am–1 pm

Hilton Head Island Farmers Market (May 22 to July 31)
Center Court, Mall at Shelter Cove, Hilton Head Island

Thursdays, 3 pm–7 pm

Bluffton Farmers Market (May 1 to October 23)
Bluffton Oyster Company, Wharf Street, Downtown Bluffton

Saturdays, 8 am–12 pm

Port Royal Farmers Market (starting April 26)
Heritage Park, Ribaut Road, near Naval Hospital Beaufort

If you want more details on the markets, visit the Beaufort County website, www.bcgov.net and click on the picture of the vegetables. In addition to schedules and contact information, the county site also has guidelines for farmers market vendors and vendor applications.

Brava to Kit Bruce, who is managing the Port Royal Market on a part-time basis. Bruce is one of the people who helped get the Port Royal Farmers Market up and running several years ago. And bravo to the Town of Port Royal; they are showing great civic leadership by funding Bruce's position and paying for tents. The market is a great asset to the town.

Diane Fornari is managing the Bluffton Market, with assistance from fellow volunteers Ed McCullough and Mary Connor. It's exciting to see a group of citizens come together to get something like this done. What's even more exciting is that the Bluffton Rotary Club has agreed

to be the market's fiscal agent. This means the market can apply for grant funding and receive tax-deductible donations – and lay a solid foundation for the future of farming in our county. Just next door, Jasper County is becoming a major player in the high-stakes world of farmers markets. Ridgeland's fabulous new retail produce market, in an old cucumber shed off of I-95, is scheduled to open in June. It will also be the site of wholesale produce auctions that start in mid-May.

Retailers, restaurant owners and anyone else who wants to buy in bulk can participate in the wholesale auctions. Right now auctions are scheduled every Monday, Wednesday and Friday throughout the growing season, but the schedule may change depending on local farm produce availability.

The inaugural wholesale auction starts at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, May 15, and the public is invited to watch. Cucumber shed, 9935 South Jacob Smart Boulevard, don't wear heels. Even though it's located in Ridgeland, the market is designed to serve farmers from eight counties, including Beaufort, Jasper, Colleton, Hampton, Allendale, Clarendon, Dorchester and Charleston.

The new wholesale market operates using a proven business model. In fact, Amish farmers in Ohio using a similar auction system have generated generous and sustainable incomes. Their success caught the eye of York Glover, an agricultural extension agent for Clemson University.

Glover liked what he saw, so he worked with Penn Center to win a \$143,000 grant from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service. Clemson University is a partner in the project, as is SC's other Land Grant university, South Carolina State University.

Glover called on the Ohio Amish for help, too. As the project was taking shape, the Amish farmers visited the Lowcountry, and our local farmers visited the Amish in Ohio. Talk about your cross-cultural experiences.

Then the Lowcountry farmers took what they learned and applied it to the development of their own auction market. Here's how it works: Farmers spend their time doing what they do best, which is farming. On auction days they drop off their pallets of produce at the market, take care of a little paperwork, and then head back to the farm. Then retailers and restaurateurs – an increasing number of whom wish to be purveyors of fresh, local fruits and vegetables – bid on the produce. Later on the market manager pays the farmers.

The wholesale auction is not the place to buy in small quantities, however. If you truly want to buy a big pallet of sweet potatoes, of course you're welcome to bid. But if you want just a few tomatoes and a watermelon, head to the retail farmers markets.

And about that farmers market in the Mall at Shelter Cove ... is there any other place on earth where you can, under the same roof, shop at Victoria's Secret for lingerie – then buy vegetables from a local farmer?

You've gotta love the Lowcountry.