

EARLY BOUNTY

Count on local sweet corn, cucumbers, squash, greens, herbs and lettuces to beef up menus while the next wave of summer crops ripens in the fields.

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Salad greens and hearty greens are part of the bounty at Twin Pond's Farm Stand in Freehold Township.

Twin Pond Farm sports two sizable markets, one fronting the farm itself, at 679 Adelpia Road (Route 524), Freehold Township, and 1459 Route 9 in Howell. Call (732) 462-8213 for info on both.

Clayton Farm is at 125 Monmouth Road (Route 537) in Freehold Township; (732) 780-2478.

Hallock's U-Pick Farm is at 38 Fischer Road in Plumsted; (609) 758-8847.

It's been an unusually favorable year for corn at his family's Twin Pond Farm, DiGregorio is explaining as he does all that sizing up, weighing and snapping. "The corn is extra-special this year; our own corn crop is phenomenal." On these 50 acres devoted just to corn on his family's land in Freehold Township, DiGregorio and his crew pick anywhere from 1,000 to 2,000 ears a day in peak season.

That season is now. For sweet corn, squash and cucumbers, herbs and bell peppers, lettuces and greens, the prime time for Shore-area farmers to pick and produce fiends to eat the early bounty is a few weeks into true summer.

With tomatoes and melons among the high-summer crops looming on the horizon, farmers with closer ties and better knowledge of the seasonal 'scape recommend digging into today's vegetables and fruits.

"I only eat corn in season," says DiGregorio, a fourth-generation farmer. "I only eat my own. I eat it probably every other night. I never get tired of corn."

At DiGregorio's farm markets, on Route 524 in Freehold Township, fronting the bulk of Twin Pond Farm, and also on Route 9 in Howell, corn flies out of the bins as fast as it's picked. Evelyn DiGregorio, Angelo's wife, says they re-stock the corn bins every hour. "It's so sweet, so fabulous, it almost tastes like dessert."

Hallock's U-Pick Farm, in Plumsted, is sporting Kirby cukes for pickles, slicing cucumbers, squashes both green and yellow, turnips, kale, collards, mustard greens, kohlrabi, beets, chard and beans in string, wax and flat varieties. And, notes Debbie Hallock Grover, "We just opened a patch of broccoli. We have a few of our own early variety tomatoes on the farm stand, from ones we started in the greenhouse and transplanted to the fields."

Come late July and into August, the sought-after butter beans and Italian flat beans will be joining the eggplant and tomatoes in bountiful amounts in the you-pick fields and on the farm stand. Then, too, Hallock adds, "we can expect our Jamaican crops to be ready."

"Jamaican" crops?

Hallock explains. "That'd be the bitter balls, which are a Jamaican eggplant, the sour-sour greens, the sweet potato leaves, which are eaten like spinach, something called 'kittley,' which looks a bit like a berry, the water greens. We have a lot of folks who come in to pick these exotics, so we grow them for them. It's all big around August."

There's a bounty now and even more coming a little later this summer at Clayton Farm in Freehold Township.

Farmers Debbie and Ross Clayton grow the favorites, but they also "do a few different things," says Debbie Clayton. "Lemon cucumbers are something we're just about getting ready to pick, and we grow tomatillos, too. They like the hot weather, so they're a little later. Yellow watermelons like hot weather, and they're just starting to set on the vine."

Like Angelo DiGregorio, she recommends "eating the vegetables that are in season now. What's ready is what we're eating — squashes, cucumbers, bunches of basil and parsley. Put the yellow pattypan squashes on the grill with shish-kebab. Just spear 'em and grill 'em. I have to say, our tomatoes are looking good."

Elsie Cruz of Lakewood, shopping at Twin Pond's stand in Freehold Township, thought Angelo DiGregorio's corn was looking mighty good. She also bought dandelions and red-leaf lettuce: "I'll stir-fry some greens and use the leaf lettuce to make a big salad. A great dinner!"

The prices, with kale, dandelions and collards at \$1 each for a huge bunch, enormous heads of leaf lettuces also at a buck a pop, and jumbo-size bouquets of herbs at 50 cents a piece, impressed Cruz, who was making her first visit to the seasonal stand. "I thought I'd take back roads home from work and I saw this place. I'm glad I did. I'll be back."

When she returns, she'll likely be greeted with Angelo DiGregorio's "next wave of crops — eggplants, tomatoes, cantaloupes, watermelons. We've had a good spring; enough rain, but not too much. I'd say the weather so far has been very favorable. Everything seems to be flourishing."

Adds Evelyn, his wife of 33 years: "We do have a great bounty this year. We feel if we have a lot of something, we want to give the buyers a break on the price. So we sell a big head of lettuce for \$1. It's our pleasure, really."