

BACK AT THE OLD STAND; LAKELAND COUPLE'S FARM MARKET SELLS WHAT THEY GROW, AND MORE

Byline: Elizabeth McCormick The Ledger

LAKELAND

Years ago, 35 to be exact, Sandra Crawford would sit between the two pecan trees on her North Lakeland property selling squash, peas, cucumbers and strawberries.

She laid them out on a 4-foot by 8-foot sheet of plywood; her wares were the fruits of her husband's labors.

'We had extra supply and a need for money,' she said.

Today, John and Sandra Crawford have more than doubled the number of fruits and vegetables they sell from their stand on the side of Kathleen Road.

'I'm back here again,' said Annie M. Smith, 83, of Lakeland as she walked up to inspect the tomatoes, cucumbers and avocados. Smith has been coming to Crawford Farms, at 3720 Kathleen Road, for 30 years.

The stand, which is open Tuesday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., averages about 150 customers a day.

'They're good, Christian people,' Smith said. 'And the fruits and vegetables taste much better than if they're from the grocery store.'

In season, 50 percent to 60 percent of the items are grown by the Crawfords on the 6-acre property, including onions, strawberries, greens, squash, beans, okra and sweet corn. Other items, such as carrots, peppers, cabbage, peanuts, mangos and sweet potatoes are bought from Tampa, Plant City, Winter Haven and from Goddard John Produce in Lakeland.

'If you compare our prices with major chains, we keep our prices down,' he said. 'They have more overhead than I do.'

Peaches and plums are \$1 a pound, three cucumbers or six ears of corn can be bought for \$1 and a basket of cherries or tomatoes is \$2. Crawford Farms has a profit margin of about 30 percent.

'This is just a farmer's market,' Crawford said, adding that the markup on the vegetables is about 35 percent to 40 percent. The stand also sells locally made pickles, jams and honey.

And the lower prices help keep business increasing throughout the year -- even during the summer months.

'We have new customers every day,' Mrs. Crawford said.

When the Crawfords bought the property in 1964, they hardly knew how to plant a tomato.

They lived in an old farmhouse with their four sons. John Crawford was born and raised in Lakeland, and Sandra is originally from Michigan.

Crawford's great-grandfather owned the property and the Crawford family was known for growing strawberries.

Crawford, 60, learned how to farm from the locals.

'It was my first occupation,' he said. 'I like the smell of the ground and I like to see the stuff come up out of the ground and grow.'

Two women occasionally help him pick the vegetables when they are ready.

Crawford worked for Owens-Illinois, a local glass bottle manufacturing company, and began to expand the farm on the side. He would bring fresh vegetables to work and share them with his co-workers.

In 1979, they built the large stand now seen in front of their home.

Crawford left Owens-Illinois and farmed full time in the early 1980s before going back to the plant in 1985 after hard freezes hurt the Crawford's strawberry business. A few years later, the Crawfords closed the stand when Mrs. Crawford found it difficult to continue running it.

'It was a hard life, but a good life,' she said.

Crawford continued to work at Owens-Illinois until it shut down earlier this year and they decided to open the farm stand again Feb. 8.

Business has now tripled when compared with sales before it closed more than 10 years ago.

'It just fell into place,' Mrs. Crawford, 61, said. 'This is where the Lord wanted us.'

Pat Moon, 52, of Lakeland was thrilled when the Crawfords reopened. She has been buying the Crawfords' fresh vegetables for about 30 years.

'I keep coming back because of the quality vegetables and kindness of the people,' she said.

Crawford said 95 percent of his customers are repeat ones. And if you're not happy with something, he says, just tell him.

'Everything is 100 percent guaranteed,' he said. 'If you got a bad melon, you don't have to bring it back.'

Finding good produce in late summer, however, can become challenging, he said, adding that you often have to bring it in from far away.

Along with selling fresh vegetables, the Crawfords started a health ministry a year ago -- an eight-week study course on healthy eating.

'The Lord led us into the health ministry,' Crawford said.

The vegetarian couple also is trying to get an organic co-op off the ground. Customers would be able to order organic items, such as tomatoes, potatoes and carrots. The Crawfords would pick up the items at an organic shop in Winter Haven and bring them to the stand to sell.

'The demand (for organic food) is good and we want to do it for health reasons,' he said. 'Places around the country are doing it and are successful.'

Doug Woolsey of Lakeland, a longtime friend and customer, said

Crawford Farms is unique.

'Most others don't grow the items on their own land and they (the Crawfords) carry healthy items,' he said. 'This is the best vegetable stand this side of the Mississippi.'

Kathleen Road will be widened in 2003, but you'll still be able to find the farm stand on the side of the road. It will just be the two of them -- their sons are busy with their own careers.

'We'll run it as long as we're physically able,' she said.

They plan to enlarge the stand and move it farther back on the property. 'We're staying right here,' she said. 'We'll make it bigger and better without losing the small-town feel.'

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