

TROPICAL FRUIT GROWERS OF SOUTH FLORIDA SPEARHEAD INDUSTRY GROWTH

Incorporated in **1988** by a group of local tropical fruit growers eager to support and advance what was then a fledgling niche industry, the **Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida (TFGSF)** has grown into a coalition of close to 100 South Florida packers and growers dedicated to serving the expanding national appetite for tropical fruit. Concentrated less than an hour from the bright lights of downtown Miami, the boutique industry is centered primarily on commercial farms of 3 to 100 acres located in South Florida's agricultural breadbasket -- the sleepy, verdant farming communities of **Homestead and the Redland**. Here, where climatic conditions make the region ideally and uniquely suited for the growth of tropical fruits (in many cases the only place some fruits are grown in the continental United States), more than 20 sweet and succulent varieties including **lychee, carambola, longan, mamey sapote, guava, mango, banana, green papaya** and many other lesser-known specialty fruits are grown, picked, packed and shipped to retail and ethnic markets as well as restaurant kitchens across the United States.

Tropical fruit has grown in South Florida for more than 100 years -- the first lychees made their way here as early as 1883 from Asia via Hawaii and renowned botanist David Fairchild (Fairchild Tropical Garden) experimented with many varieties of tropical fruits in the early 20th century. Now, the industry has the potential to grow beyond its early ethnic niche, as America's population continues to diversify and the demand for healthful fruits and vegetables increases.

Changing American tastes follows ethnic food trends -- putting salsa at the top of the condiment heap and sushi in midwestern supermarkets. The same hunger for new and interesting foods has helped more and more tropical fruits find their way into mainstream American diets, while *Floribbean* cuisine, a style of cooking that utilizes tropical fruits and fresh local ingredients, has sparked culinary trends nationwide. TFGSF seeks to further broaden the popularity of South Florida's tropical fruits by heightening awareness of the many nutritious and delicious fruits that have been staples in Latin American and Asian cooking for generations and are now available seasonally and in some cases, year round throughout the United States.

Volume is necessary to meet demand, and the industry is poised to take off. The Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida's projections for this year's crop call for 26,000,000 pounds of mango to be picked and shipped nationally during a season that runs May to September 2004. An expected 5,000,000 pounds of carambola, or starfruit, will be shipped year round, peaking in August/September and December/January.

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6,000,000 pounds of guava, one of the most successful fruits to be grown and shipped in South Florida, will be harvested between March and September, while 2,000,000 pounds of luscious lychees will be gathered in late May to early July. Between 3 and 4 million pounds of mamey sapote, a sweet, red-colored fruit with a custard-like texture popular among Latin Americans that has the potential to become the next true crossover fruit, will be picked between March and September.

Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida, Inc. is headquartered in Homestead, Florida. The group's early efforts helped create the Tropical Fruit Policy Act in 1990, which resulted in the formation of the **Tropical Fruit Advisory Committee**, a group that meets monthly with representatives from the Florida Department of Agriculture as well as growers, packers and shippers. In 2002, the State of Florida granted the Council a Specialty Crop Initiative Grant Program for horticultural research and marketing. This grant runs through June 2005 with the goals of promoting the advantages of fresh from Florida tropical fruits, and conducting marketing and educational efforts to increase awareness and exposure to consumers and food service organizations of these fruits, some of which are not widely known.

TFGSF was also instrumental in rallying the industry after the devastating effects of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Throughout its 16-year history, the group has sought and procured research and marketing funds -- producing cookbooks, videos, posters, brochures and an award-winning website through the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. In addition to continuing to seek funding to enhance and promote the tropical fruit industry TFGSF remains active in local farming issues, represents the industry at trade shows and maintains a strong presence as the community's voice in the expanding global marketplace.

Tropical Fruit Growers Association of South Florida is located at 18710 SW 288th Street, Homestead, FL. Phone: 305-401-1502. Please visit: www.florida-agriculture.com/tropical to look for new released features. E-mail: tropicalfruitgrowers@earthlink.com.

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