



By: Mike Duff July 17, 2023

## **New Jersey's climate and prime location make it a key player in the produce game.**

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Circumstances have been favorable this year for New Jersey growers. The warm winter and cool spring equaled happy cultivating in an agricultural community that has been raising a wider range of fruits and vegetables.

Carol DeFoor, a manager at the [Vineland Produce Auction](#), Vineland, NJ, characterizes the growing season so far as “extremely positive.”

“There is plenty of product available. The weather has been great,” she adds.

Although New Jersey growers serve customers across much of the United States, the customer base continues to be concentrated in the New York City and Philadelphia markets and then up to Boston and down to Washington, D.C.

Even though they're growing a wider range of crops, New Jersey growers still specialize, but it's pretty common for any one grower to offer more than a dozen commodities. Some growers may specialize to fill big orders of peppers, while others enter the auction looking to move smaller volumes of greater variety.

Stronger communication and even branding the grower is more common today, DeFoor says, and New Jersey requires growers to identify themselves by name and address on boxes. Not everyone does it to the same degree, but more growers are using everything from graphics to social media to establish a connection with consumers.

### **JERSEY FRESH = JERSEY STRONG**

For many retailers, the growing season and the New Jersey branded promotional campaign, Jersey Fresh, are tightly associated. The program is coordinated by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, Trenton, NJ.

“We buy Jersey Fresh produce in season from a farm less than one mile away from our Tabernacle, NJ, store,” says Ronald Murphy, of [Murphy's Fresh Markets](#).

Tabernacle also is home to the company's headquarters. Murphy's has two additional stores in Medford and Beach Haven, NJ.

For Murphy's, local produce isn't strictly seasonal, as the company even buys frozen cranberries and blueberries from a local grower in winter. Still, Murphy's customers are particularly excited when spring arrives.

"Our customers always compliment us on the Jersey Fresh produce when it is in season," he adds. "The tomatoes, fresh corn, blueberries, cauliflower and cantaloupes are always excellent and because they're grown and delivered from local farms, we're able to offer a great value to the customer and community."

"We supporting the communities we serve. We always display our Jersey Fresh produce right in the front of the store, as we like the value statement that it makes."

New Jersey is serious about its support of produce grown in the Garden State. Last year, a law took effect that directs retailers in New Jersey to only label produce as local if it is grown in the Garden State, says Joe Atchison III, marketing and development division director for the [department of agriculture](#).

"Consumers, more than ever, want to know where their produce comes from, and the local label now means it was grown in the Garden State," Atchison says. "While New Jersey is well-known for its great tasting and production of tomatoes, we are also ranked annually in the top 10 for production in the U.S. in several other fruits and vegetables."

Ross Farnsworth, vice president of produce of Keasbey, NJ-based [Wakerfern Corp.](#), says the cooperative has always been committed to locally grown produce and tries to buy produce as close to the stores that comprise the operation, including those under the ShopRite banner.

"The Jersey Fresh logo reminds customers that they are getting fresh, locally grown produce," he says. "Customers have come to expect locally sourced fruits and vegetables and supporting the Jersey Fresh campaign and partnering with local farmers in New Jersey are key ways we source the best and freshest produce for our stores."

## **SEASON IN FULL SWING**

Atchison says the Garden State growing season "starts in the early spring with greens, and then with asparagus and other crops coming in during April and May. Blueberries, sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers and peaches are among the summer highlights, with more greens and hard squashes being available until November."

Peter Dandrea, director of sales, [Dandrea Produce](#), Vineland, NJ, agrees growing conditions in the Garden State have been favorable so far this year.

"The early season has everyone in the New Jersey growing community excited," he says. "Product is looking healthy and on schedule. We feel great about what is shaping up to be another great year of New Jersey local items."



Bill Nardelli Jr., vice president of sales at [Nardelli Bros-Lake View Farms](#), Cedarville, NJ., says the spring season has been advantageous. “The cool overnights were good for the wet items,” he points out.

Nardelli says his family has been involved with the Jersey Fresh program, but “we try not to limit ourselves,” he says. “We have a pretty good shipping window, and we’re able to ship out over the Mississippi, the Southeast after their windows, to Maine and Canada and more.”

Atchison also points to producers who ship their product well beyond the immediate metro areas. “This includes blueberries, asparagus and greens, which go into Canada and the Midwest, and several other types of produce that reach all along the East Coast and into the Midwest.”

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The growing area advantages are significant, and Michael Giordano, sales and procurement representative, [Consalo Family Farms](#), Vineland, NJ, says Garden State growers understand how to deliver.

“New Jersey produce has been a driving force in the spring, summer and fall marketplace for well over 75 years,” he says. “South Jersey, particularly, boasts an ideal location, not only for growing, but for centralized packing and shipping. Our headquarters, based in Vineland, NJ, is less than 150 miles away from Philadelphia, New York and Washington D.C. With the growing costs in packing and logistics, the ability to harvest, pack and ship product to local markets gives the Garden State an instant advantage.”

“Local is everything, and the large range of products grown in New Jersey gives even the pickiest produce shoppers something to look for in their local supermarket,” Giordano adds.

Success of the growing region has been built up and out by reputation, Dandrea says, “The local deal is a major driving force for the New Jersey produce industry. It helps people connect with their communities and feel good about eating healthy: It’s a win-win.”

Some of the state's reputation was built by tomatoes, he adds. "The Jersey tomato reigns supreme, and we love it. It has brought a great reputation to New Jersey's ability to grow incredible produce and sets other fresh produce items up for success."

New Jersey will always be famous for tomatoes, blueberries and eggplant, he adds, but retailers can promote a wide variety of other produce, as well. "A great example of this is Jersey lettuce. Weather, freight and labor issues have unfortunately hindered the lettuce production on the West Coast and in Mexico in recent years. New Jersey boasts two lettuce seasons, in the spring and fall, and can help provide relief to an always demanding market."

## **VALUE-ADDED EVOLUTION**

Nardelli says the region continues to grow and change, and that involves making it easier for consumers to purchase product their way, which can boost sales and consumption.

"We got into more value-added packaging, trade packs of corn for our retailer partners," he says. "And we've tried add-on things."

Dandrea says there is an increase in branded items coming out of New Jersey in the fresh category. "Retailers want labels they can trust to deliver for their customers, week in and week out. Labeling gives us the ability to differentiate and is the perfect way to accentuate the fantastic quality and eating experience that local New Jersey produce offers."

Giordano says Consalo is "seeing an increased demand for sustainable packaging and has a plan in place to be fully sustainable on our materials in the next few years." He adds they've seen a large increase in demand for products like their peel-and-reseal label on blueberries "and believe the marketplace will continue to trend in this direction."