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Selling Customers on Healthy Produce

Continued from page 21

"She got it started," said Goodson, "and the trend has continued, with our growers recruiting others to come and sell here."

Called the Historic Longview Farmers Market, it meets on weekends from March through November in a parking lot on the corner of Cotton and High streets. "It's the former site of the Kelly Plow [Works], which acquired the second business license in Texas history in 1843," Goodson said.

Personal market relationships

Heard does steady business with a number of the market's growers through the market, rather than buying direct from the growers. That's because the market offers something she cannot get from a direct buying relationship: the product diversity she'll encounter over the course of the market's season.

Still, she has created some close business relationships with a few of the growers. One is Cindi Bjork, an organic (though not USDA-certified) grower in Pine Mills, Texas.

Twenty years ago, Bjork and her husband Bob grew tired of their life in Tucson, Ariz., and moved to a 76-acre East Texas farm. Since then, Bjork has grown what began as her personal garden into a small enterprise.

The Bjorks eat a lot from their half-acre garden and sell what they don't eat year-round. That's an advantage Texas growers have over northern farmers—a year-round growing season, which allows them to make money on fewer acres.

Bjork's organic enterprise, which also sells a small array of organic gardening supplies, is called Aunt Cindi's Organic Market Center. Her mainstay crop is greens: collard, kale, spinach, mustard greens, and a large variety of lettuce and chards.

It is those greens that brought Heard, Bjork and Goodson together. Another common thread is that both Heard and Bjork are organic farming educators.

James Lowell Tanksley of Mineola, Texas, is another of Heard's favored suppliers. He derives 80 percent of his annual sales from the Longview market.

Tanksley, president of the Historic Longview Farmers Market, steadily grows 3 acres of sustainable commodities in both of Texas' growing seasons. He feeds his operation with 8,000 to 10,000 seedling sets grown in his hothouse each year.

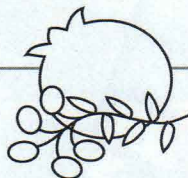
"I don't buy my seedlings because you never know what you are getting," he said.

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