

The Mango Is King of the Miami Summer

July 8, 2023 In News



The Mango Is King of the Miami Summer

Those who sweat and suffer through June and July in South Florida are rewarded with mangoes blushing from trees in yards, streets and strip malls.

WHY WE'RE HERE

The air gets thick with humidity as summer arrives in South Florida. Evening thunder murmurs. The tropics begin to stir.

Then, something magical happens: The mango trees bear fruit. In good years, they produce so much that strangers give away mangoes on their lawns. Neighbors pack them in boxes to mail to loved ones. Friends offer homemade pies.

This has been a very good year.

During the month of June, Zak Stern, the founder of Zak the Baker, his bakery in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood, invited customers to bring in six local mangoes in exchange for a loaf of bread. He started taking in about 200 a day.

In the upscale Miami suburb of Coral Gables, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden has 550 varieties of mango, one of the most diverse collections in the world. Bruce W. Greer, the president of the board of trustees, helped start an annual mango festival. Now in its 30th year, it is expected to draw as many as 8,000 visitors this weekend.

A few months ago, Mr. Greer's sister came to town and wanted to take her daughter to see the house where she and Mr. Greer lived as children. The two mango trees their father had planted in the early 1960s — a Haden and a Kent — were still there, thriving.

"I literally remember my dad putting them in when I was 6 years old," said Mr. Greer, who has 22 trees of his own. "They went through I don't know how many owners. They went through my whole life."

That inspired Mr. Greer to envision a new "Million Mango Project" for Fairchild to promote tree plantings across Miami, with the goal of bringing people closer to the prized fruit and shade to neighborhoods with limited tree canopy.

"We're going to reintroduce these mangoes into the landscape," he said.

Two years ago, shortly after moving into a historic home in Coral Gables, Catalina Saldarriaga found herself inundated with fruit from two big mango trees on her property that she thinks must be at least 60 years old. This year, she is again collecting 70 to 80 mangoes each day.

"It may be my favorite fruit," said Ms. Saldarriaga, 64, who grew up in Colombia with much smaller mangoes. "But you can only eat one or two a day."

She gives the rest to friends, family, her cleaning lady, the contractors fixing her pergola. The mangoes that fall to the ground, uneaten by iguanas, birds or squirrels, she leaves out on a grassy patch by her driveway for passers-by to take for free.

One man stopped on his bicycle to thank her. Someone left flowers.

"What a delight," she said, "that someone else can also enjoy them."