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Sentinel Photo by James Poulson

Florence Welsh holds heads of cauliflower and broccoli at her garden today. The unusually warm summer weather so far this year has yielded

a bumper harvest of vegetables. Welsh will be selling the vegetables of her labor at the Sitka Farmers Market Saturday.

Market to Highlight Locally-Grown Food

By CRAIG GIAMMONA
Sentinel Staff Writer

The notion that it's impossible to grow vegetables in Sitka falls away quickly when you visit Florence Welsh on Davidoff Street.

Cabbages the size of bowling balls line the left-hand side of the her driveway, and giant cauliflowers, lettuce beds and broccoli are just a few steps away.

Next to her garage, up a slight hill, are fresh flowers, with pink and purple canterbury bells and delphiniums growing under the protection of a roof that keeps the rain off and shields them from the wind.

Growing beds are around every corner with potatoes, zucchini, carrots, chives, mint, basil, chard, rhubarb and fennel — the list goes on, and a good deal of what Welsh is growing, including fresh cut flowers, will be available at this year's first Sitka Farmers Market, which opens 10 a.m. Saturday at the ANB Hall.

Besides Welsh, market co-coordinators Kerry MacLane and Linda Wilson said, there are two other main vegetable providers who will operate tables at the market: Gimbal Botanicals, which is run by Hopè Merritt, and the Sitka Local Foods Network, which has been tending to the St. Peter's Fellowship Farm.

All three operations are completely organic, grown with post-spawn seaweed as the primary fertilizer.

It is a technique that Welsh has advocated since 1984, when she began her growing operation in Sitka.

She avoids chemicals and uses lightweight, gauze-like row covers to keep bugs off her developing plants.

The same is true for Gimbal Botanicals. Merritt grows culinary herbs in her greenhouse and tends the growing beds outside Judy Johnstone's house, an arrangement that has been in place for two seasons now.

Last year, Johnstone "got religion" and ripped out the ornaments that had long grown outside her Peterson

tude and damp climate.

Organizers said last year's markets were a success on the latter count.

"I think the 'food, not lawns' fever is spreading through Sitka," MacLane said. "I think it's mushrooming and spreading all over town. Because of the market a lot more people are growing a lot more food."

Some local restaurants have also gotten on board, with both the Larkspur Cafe and Ludvig's Bistro taking regular deliveries from Merritt and Welsh.

The recent weather has clearly helped the Sitka growing season and gardeners are complaining about what might be described as a good problem: too much sun.

Welsh said today that the recent warm and dry weather had exploded her organic garden and forced her to spend more time than usual watering her plants.

"It's amazing this year with the heat," Welsh said. "I've just been watering for a month."

As she took a Sentinel reporter and photographer on a quick tour of the grounds today, Welsh marveled at the size of some of her vegetables.

"I've never seen one this big," Welsh said as she harvested broccoli for the market. "It's scary, it's bigger than a head."

Last summer was cold and damp, and Welsh said the 2008 growing season was discouraging. Her lettuce didn't "head up," making it only about half-way toward fully formed heads. And her zucchinis — she described the vegetable as a good barometer of the success of the growing season — were few and far between.

But the worst of times turned to the best of times this year. Welsh said she'll have two or three lettuce harvests in 2009 and probably more zucchinis than she can handle.

"The lettuce is what's blowing me away," she said, examining red romaine and iceberg heads.

She explained that the key factor in the growing season is the heat of the soil.

A few sporadic nice days in the

summer will not spur a good harvest. But extended stretches of warm weather make for good growing conditions, Welsh said.

MacLane and Merritt also complained good naturedly about having to do so much watering this year. MacLane, who is president of the Sitka Local Foods Network board of directors, was incredulous when a watering system had to be set up at the

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Alaska Senators Say Native Contracts Fair

By MARY PEMBERTON
Associated Press Writer

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — A program that grants preferences to Alaska Native corporations when they compete for billions of dollars in government contracts was scrutinized Thursday by a U.S. Senate panel.

Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat who chaired the Senate Subcommittee on Contracting Oversight hearing, said she sought to make sure the federal government is getting the best value for its money.

McCaskill said it's time to question the fairness of preferences given to Alaska Native companies, especially when other businesses willing to do the work for less are getting squeezed out.

But Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, said the Small Business Administration program was "one of unprecedented success" that had helped many Alaska Natives get a decent education

and pull themselves out of poverty.

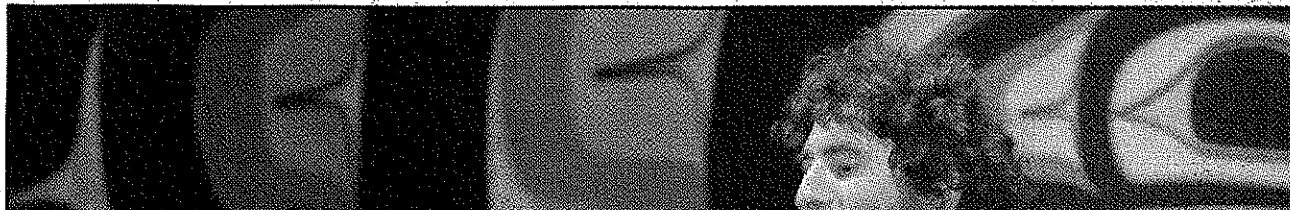
Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, also defended the opportunities under the program, saying they were "structured in a way that they would be meaningful to the challenges of economic development in Indian Country."

"Although today's hearing is labeled an inquiry into Alaska Native Corporation contracting, let me make clear that there is no such thing as an Alaska Native Corporation preference in government contracting," she said. "There is a preference for Indian tribes, which includes Alaska Native Corporations as well as Native Hawaiian organizations."

McCaskill said the hearing had "absolutely nothing" to do with whether Alaska Natives have struggled to improve their lives.

"Our responsibility is to look out for the taxpayer," said McCaskill, a

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icals. Merritt grows culinary herbs in her greenhouse and tends the growing beds outside Judy Johnstone's house, an arrangement that has been in place for two seasons now.

Last year, Johnstone "got religion" and ripped out the ornamentals that had long grown outside her Peterson Street home. She replaced the flowers with vegetables, a trend that has taken hold at other Sitka gardens.

MacLane said the Sitka Local Foods Network has taken over four or five former ornamental gardens at homes and converted them to growing food.

This is exactly what members of the local food network envisioned when they launched the first-ever Sitka Farmers Market last year.

In all, more than 20 vendors are signed up for Saturday's market, with local artisans interspersed among the gardeners and local harvesters. There will also be wild black cod, halibut and salmon sold by local fishermen.

Live music is scheduled for the ANB Hall stage and in the "jam tent," in the adjacent parking lot.

The Sitka Farmers Market grew out of the 2008 health summit, where concerns about local "food security" and healthy eating options were front and center.

After participants identified the formation of a farmers market as a top priority, the Sitka Local Foods Network got work and ultimately held three markets.

The impetus for the farmers market was twofold: provide fishermen and growers with an opportunity to sell local food, and also expand the local food movement by showing, first-hand, that it was possible to grow food crops in Sitka's northerly lati-

spinning into nearby streets.

In his sermon broadcast live on ra-

Market . . .

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St. Peter's farm.

He said the farm was already on its fourth harvest of lettuce, but added there's still room to expand.

Even with the increased vegetable-growing around town, there still aren't enough local vegetables to supply Sitka's grocery stores, he said.

For that, the town would need community greenhouses, and the development of these facilities is a top priority for the Sitka Local Foods Network.

The group has also applied for a grant to study Sitka's "food security," which refers to the fact that Sitka depends on fresh produce brought in from long distances away, with typically only a few days' supply in the stores at any one time.

Lettuce, beets, carrots and other crops grown locally by the Sitka Local Foods Network will be on sale at the Sitka Farmers Market Saturday.

In addition to herbs, greens and turnips from Gimbal Botanicals, Merritt will have fresh beach asparagus and locally-blended teas for sale Saturday.

Merritt and Welsh have made a handful of beach asparagus-harvesting trips in recent weeks to spots around the area.

The crunchy, salty greens are good for salads and can be used in a variety of recipes, Merritt said.

This is another thing that organizers had in mind when they launched the farmers market: allowing customers and the people who grow, catch or harvest their food to get to know each other.

At Merritt's table potential customers can pick up a bag of beach asparagus and ask where they might find it. They can ask a local troller about the recent king opener, or inquire how Welsh developed her organic garden over the last 20 or so years.

"It's great to meet the person who caught the fish," MacLane said. "It's local people selling to local people."

The farmers market will be open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the ANB Hall.

MacLane recently convinced the state to allow some vendors at the farmers market to accept WIC coupons. WIC is a nutrition program for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and their children, and the state has agreed to allow Sitka WIC participants to use coupons to buy produce from Gimbal Botanicals and the Sitka Local Foods Network.

MacLane also noted that the farmers market is looking for local musical acts to entertain at the upcoming markets.

For more information call MacLane at 752-0654.