

HUNDREDS TURN OUT FOR FINAL FARMERS MARKET

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Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News (At right): Natalie Ortega of Natalie's Greenhouse & Garden helps bag produce from the 37-acre farm at this season's last farmers market in Beloit. The season saw wet and warm weather, extending the growing season well into October. Beloit's winter market kicks off Nov. 4.

BELOIT - The Beloit Farmers Market wrapped up Saturday with hundreds of residents and visitors braving the cold weather in search of unique local goods before winter.

From May to October, over 100 vendors line the streets of downtown Beloit, giving visitors and residents an option to buy local products from produce to baked goods and more.

The final weekend of the outdoor season is Halloween-themed, with vendors passing out candy and treats to area children trick-or-treating from booth-to-booth.

Multiple vendors said this year's market was a success, drawing more business than ever for local farms and businesses.

Meanwhile, frequent shoppers of the market said this year's market was stronger than ever with greater variety.

For Alix Backus and her family, who've come to the market for the last 10 years, each year the market grows offering new shopping items.

"I like to be able to stock up on local veggies all summer," she said. "It's great to be able to buy some stuff from local farmers rather than grocery stores."

The family typically stocks up on green beans, tomatoes, squash, pickles and elk, she added.

"We really enjoy it," Backus said. "It's great to see how much it's grown since we started coming. We come almost every week."

Longtime vendor Natalie Ortega of Natalie's Garden & Greenhouse said of the 23 years the farm had come to the market, this year's was the most prosperous.

"This was our best year ever," Ortega said. "The market is growing and we're seeing more people every week. I think people are getting more conscious of what they are eating, buying more produce."

The extended growing season, something Ortega said was unprecedented, let the farm keep growing into October, offering summer crops like peppers and eggplant at the final outdoor market.

"That's very unusual for us," she added. Next year Ortega hopes to come back with a bigger variety of produce since this year's crop was lacking broccoli and cauliflower.

The push to support local and eat local has been key to the market's growth over the years, Ortega said.

"It's important because people understand about their health that they should be eating whole foods and fresh vegetables," she said. "People are becoming more aware of that. We're fortunate enough to live in an area like here in southern Wisconsin that there are a lot of farmers markets. It's a movement going to eating fresh food."

Lora Cawkins of the Wright Way Farm said this year's unusual weather hurt some crop yields, but didn't impact popular staples like greens, including lettuce and kale or items like corn and potatoes.

"Part of the season was horribly wet," Cawkins said. "We lost our onion crop and some tomatoes."

She said the farm is hoping for less rain at the beginning of the season and more at the end of the cycle. The farm recently implemented an irrigation system on the 38-acre plot to help for next year's harvest.

Cawkins said she had her sights on the Beloit Winter Market, a three-weekend indoor market at Bushel & Peck's. The market will draw around 10 vendors to the downtown store, 328 State St., for shoppers to get one last chance of fresh goods before the temperatures drop for the year.

Sage Green at Bushel & Peck's said this year's market was fun, but she too said she was looking ahead to the winter market.

"I think it will be nice to have a crowd there to specifically shop," Green said.

Bushel & Peck's staff will even operate some vendor booths of local farmers and businesses unable to be present at the market during the three-week weekend series from Nov. 4-18.

Reflecting on this year's outdoor season, Green said she enjoyed the bonds created by local businesses and regular shoppers.

"It's such a community of people that come each week, so it was really fun to get to meet everyone and be part of that," she said.

The winter market will run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. For more information on Downtown Beloit Association's outdoor market, visit downtownbeloit.com/us/farmers-market-2/.