Consumer demand for fruits and vegetables grown on Long Island is driving supermarket chains to buy heavily from farmers on the East End.

Locally grown produce is being sold in hundreds of supermarkets throughout Long Island, including large and midsized chains such as King Kullen, Best Market, North Shore Farms, Stop & Shop, ShopRite, Whole Foods, and Stew Leonard’s.

Shoppers’ interest in local produce has increased in recent years, Stop & Shop spokesman James Keenoy said. The purchase-based chain, with 51 stores on Long Island, buys from more than 20 farms on the East End.

“There is definite consumer demand for locally sourced and grown produce, and we are trying to fulfill that demand,” Keenoy said.

Local grocers say they are meeting demand from customers, and investing in Long Island.

“Our farmers are our neighbors,” said Richard Conger, director of produce and floral for Bethpage-based King Kullen, a 35-store chain. “If we didn’t have their product, then they would have a harder time. That’s their livelihood.”

And there are ripple effects, they said: “When you buy local, it is not just that product specifically,” said Eran Raitses, co-owner of Bethpage-based Best Market, which has 22 stores on the Island, and plans to open two more by the end of summer. “It is the trucking, it is the accounting, it is the packaging, it’s everything around it that stays local. It...
FARMS from A33

benefits the local economy.”
Suffolk has about 600 farms, and nearly half grow vegetables and fruits, producing $340 million in annual sales of all agricultural products, according to the latest available (2012) data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service. In comparison, Nassau has about 55 farms, with about one-fifth growing vegetables, booking $6.25 million in total sales, according to the data.

The amount of Long Island-grown fruits and vegetables sold at supermarkets here can be substantial. At some chains anywhere from 30 percent to 60 percent of produce sold from May through November is grown on Long Island.

Grocery retailers, wholesale distributors, farmers and consumers say buying produce from local farms boosts the local economy, supports family-owned businesses, provides jobs, preserves farmland, and reduces trucking costs and pollution.

“Buying Long Island produce is definitely a way to show that local spirit,” said Rob Carpenter, administrative director of the Long Island Farm Bureau based in Calverton.

Greenfield’s ShopRite co-owner Seth Greenfield said he expects to double his sales of local produce from 22 Long Island farms at his ShopRite stores. There are a total of 12 ShopRite stores, which are operated by co-op members, on the Island.

Greenfield said customers started demanding local produce about two years ago.

“We were in the stores every day, and they would ask, ‘Can you carry more local? Because that is what we are looking for,’” Greenfield said. “We aim to please, and we listen to our customers. They said they wanted it, and we’ve got to react.”

Seasonal favorites
During the harvest season on Long Island, usually May through November, shoppers can find items from local farms, including asparagus, peppers, lettuce, kale, parsley, cilantro, cauliflower, corn, cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, eggplant, and pumpkin, depending on the growing period.

“We have a bit of a unique climate here,” said farmer Phil Schmitt, who operates Phil A. Schmitt & Sons Farms Inc. in Riverhead. His family has been farming for more than 100 years.

Long Island tends to have cooler weather because it is surrounded by water, resulting in being “able to grow some pretty quality stuff in the middle of the summertime,” Schmitt said.

Supermarket chains typically buy conventional fruits and vegetables from local farmers, not organic crops, local grocers said. That’s because boutique farms that offer organic produce tend to grow small quantities and cannot meet the demand from supermarket chains, which also buy from other states such as California, New Jersey, Maryland and Florida, as well as countries such as Mexico and Costa Rica.

“I don’t know anyone at a level that can do it to get us product in our stores,” said Dashan Dookhu, produce and floral supervisor for Greenfield’s ShopRite. “They may do their farm stands, where they can mark it out at a level that they can sell it and market it as organic.”

Phil Barbato, board president of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York based outside Rochester, agreed that organic farmers may not be participating because they cannot produce enough supply, and because they prefer to interact with their customers.

“It is better to sell directly to people,” said Barbato, who owns Biophilia Organic Farm in Jamesport, where he grows fruits and vegetables. “You take out the middleman and get a retail price instead of a wholesale price. I like the fact that I know my customers and their children. It is also better for my bottom line.”

It is also time-consuming, labor-intensive, costly and difficult for those farms to get the required organic certifications, farmers and food retailers said.

“Grown on Long Island”
It can be tough for supermarket shoppers to decipher what’s truly local in stores. The definition can vary from market to market. To clarify the definition of local, the Long Island Farm Bureau adopted the logo “Grown on Long Island” that is used by farmers and supermarkets.

“The definition of local can be suspect sometimes because there is no standard definition of locally grown, so if we know it was ‘Grown on Long Island’ that it comes from our own backyard,” Carpenter said.

Family owned and operated King Kullen uses signs that indicate if a vegetable or fruit was grown on Long Island and posts farmer profiles in stores. The chain works with 10 farmers on Long Island, who provide about 30 percent of the produce sold in stores during the growing season.

“Locally grown and Long Island grown are two different things,” said King Kullen’s Conner. “If you want to go by definition, locally grown can be anything within a 100-mile radius. That could mean New Jersey, upstate New York, certainly Connecticut. When we say Long Island grown, it is specific to Long Island.”

For Whole Foods, any produce grown in New York is considered local, said Elly Truesdell, the company’s local forager for the Northeast region. Whole Foods buys directly from farmers and through distributors to stock stores on Long Island and in New York City. It works with more than 20 farms on the East End.

“We try to be as transparent as possible through messaging and the way we merchandise products,” said Truesdell, adding store signs feature the name of farms and their locations.

“In our three [Long Island] stores, we will feature Long Island growers primarily,”

Some supermarket chains deal directly with the farmers, while others opt to use brokers and wholesale distributors.

Wholesale distributor J. Kings Food Service Professionals Inc., a privately owned company based in Holtsville, does business with 22 farms on Long Island to provide produce to supermarkets, restaurants, health
ON THE COVER
Lyle Wells, owner of Wells Homestead Acres in Riverhead, says supermarket demand has helped local farmers.

facilities and universities. J. Kings uses temperature-controlled vehicles and climate-controlled rooms to keep the produce from spoiling.

J. Kings’ yearly produce purchases from Long Island farmers increased from about $750,000 eight years ago to about $7 million today, said Joel Panagakos, who developed the produce division for J. Kings in 1989.

“There is a great demand for the product,” he said. “It has helped the farmers market the product better.”

One of the farmers who works directly with J. Kings is Lyle Wells, who owns Wells Homestead Acres in Riverhead. His 150-acre farm’s biggest crop is asparagus, which is cut by hand with a blade, thrown in a basket, bundled and kept in water in a crate tagged “Long Island” to stay fresh until an early morning pickup.

“Some of the supermarket chains have looked to the local growers to supply their seasonal needs, and it has worked out fairly well for a lot of the local growers and kept us in business,” said Wells, whose family has been farming since 1961.

Meeting demand
Another customer of J. Kings is farm-fresh food retailer Stew Leonard’s, which opened its first Long Island store, in Farmingdale, in January. The Norwalk, Connecticut-based chain expects its purchases from Long Island farms to jump 100-fold now that it has a store here.

“Sometimes it is tough dealing with the local farmers, because they may not have the quantity of product that we want,” said Stew Leonard Jr., president and chief executive of the family owned and operated company. “They may have a pickup truck or something... Sometimes we would send out one of our trucks to the farms just to help them out.”

By working directly with the farmers, supermarkets can reduce the farmers’ distribution costs, Best Market’s Raitses said. The Bethpage-based chain has been picking up most of its local produce since 1994. The family-owned company uses six local farms to provide 60 percent of the produce it sells during the growing season.

“Distribution usually is the biggest obstacle, but we can resolve that for them,” said Raitses, adding Best Market has a warehouse in Farmingdale.

“Plus, costwise, we already have the trucks going to the stores every day, so we just have to make sure it is done early in the morning.”

The direct relationships also allow farmers to plan ahead for the growing season, sometimes as early as February. When harvesting begins, supermarkets and distributors will order the number of cases they need on a day-by-day or week-by-week basis. Long Island farmers generally grow multiple crops at different times on the same land.

“It makes a world of a difference, where I don’t have to think about, ‘Am I going to be able to sell this?’” said Carl Gabrielsen, owner of Gabrielsen Farms in Jamesport, who works directly with Best Market. “We can project our costs ahead of time. We can all settle on a price, so it works for both of us.”

The price of produce depends on the item and the cost to get it in stores, said Greg Farinella, produce manager of the North Shore Farms store in Glen Cove. The family-owned specialty grocer works directly with seven local farmers who bring the items to the stores or distribute through other local farms.

Recently, the Glen Cove store was selling Long Island cauliflower for $2.99 a head, compared to cauliflower from California for $3.99.

“This time of year, I’d rather support locally grown” no matter the price, said Khoda Berke of West Hempstead, a retired nurse who was shopping at Greenfield’s ShopRite in New Hyde Park. “Why not support Long Island farms?”

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LOCAL PRODUCE AVAILABLE IN SUPERMARKETS:

June through November:
Asparagus, collard greens, spinach, beets, escarole, lettuce, parsley, Swiss chard, green cabbage, squash

July through November:
Corn, red cabbage, cucumbers, Swiss chard, peppers, jalapeños

August through October:
Peppers, hot peppers, radishes, eggplants, tomatoes

September through November:
Squash, pumpkins, gourds, corn, cauliflower, broccoli, potatoes, spinach, Brussels sprouts

Source: J. Kings Food Service Professionals Inc.