

# Locally Grown: Scharko Farms

By Conne Ward-Cameron

It's that time of year – farmers' markets are opening around

the city ready to provide a bounty of spring and summer produce. The East Atlanta Village Farmer's Market opens the first Thursday in

May. Linda and Tony Scharko will be starting their second year at the market, greeting their old customers and making new friends. They appreciate the connection these markets make between the farmer and the consumer.

"We feel local has become the new organic," said Linda. "The consumer is talking directly to the person who's grown the food, and they can find out how it was grown and how they feel about it, and interact directly with the farmer. They're not buying things that have been shipped from California, picked two weeks before they got their hands on it."

The Scharkos refer to themselves as "a couple of old hippies that farm for pleasure and sustainability." The couple has four acres and a roadside stand just a few blocks from historic downtown Fairburn, about a half-hour from Atlanta. "It's our way of letting folks in on our enjoyment of the earth," Linda said.

A mile or two off the interstate,

the farm sits in the middle of a suburban landscape. The Scharkos live across the street with a little blue house next door serving as their farm stand. The first thing you notice on the farm proper is the street-side, eye-catching cut-flower and herb garden, colorful for much of the year. Then you notice all the yard-art bottle trees and old farming implements, bird houses and the cupola from a church Tony was hired to demolish. The ancient treadmill and exercise bicycle are testimony to Tony's sense of humor – as if he and Linda didn't get enough exercise as it is.

"I grew up in Union City in a family where we pretty much lived out of our garden," Linda said. "Tony grew up in Fairburn on a 600-acre farm with beef cattle." The Scharkos had a friend who was selling at the farmers' market out of Carrollton, so just for fun they decided one year to share a booth with him and sell some of the extra produce from their



The Scharkos welcome birds on their small farm and have posted this bark birdhouse for them.



PHOTOS BY MARCIA KILLINGSWORTH

Tony Scharko, above, grew up on a 600-acre farm and now farms his own four acres with his wife, Linda. They sell vegetables, cut flowers and herbs at their roadside stand and at the East Atlanta Village Farmers' Market on Thursdays from 4 p.m. to dusk.

garden.

"We got the bug," laughed Linda. "We enjoy the camaraderie with other farmers, and we get a kick out of people who are interested in locally grown food. We did the Carrollton market for a few years, helped start a market here in Fairburn with other farmers, and then wanted to move into an Atlanta market, and became a part of the East Atlanta Village market." Now Linda serves on the board of



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the market.

For a family that cooks out of the garden, it came as a surprise to Linda that many people had never prepared Southern staples like fresh field peas. "People are intrigued, but they don't know what to do with them, so we give them a recipe or tell them how to cook it. And those are the people who come back next week to tell you how it turned out."

The Scharkos continue to sell at the local market in Fairburn; from the farm and during the summer they have a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), program in which buyers "subscribe" to receive a weekly basket of produce, thereby supporting the farm. Most of their CSA members are Intown people who pick up their boxes in East Atlanta.

Linda said it works to have both a booth and a CSA in East Atlanta. "Some people want to come and select just what they want. Others like the convenience of having the box all ready for them; then if they particularly like something, can come and shop for more of it at the market, or if they want something that wasn't something in the standard package, they can shop for that, too."

Back in Fairburn, there are two-and-a-half-acres in production. They grow now what they used to grow for themselves, but in bigger quantities. "We've had to develop the ground as we expanded. We started building up the soil, and that's been real rewarding to watch, to see the hard red clay soil change to wonderful light-gray loamy soil, and it's wonderful to see how much water was held in the soil with a minimal amount of watering."

Although at Scharko Farms they use all natural fertilizers and compost and manures, and don't use any herbicides or insecticides, they cannot label their produce as certified "organic," Linda said "Right now, we're considering becoming Certified Natu-



MARCIA KILLINGSWORTH

**Linda Scharko, working the vegetable garden on her Fairburn farm, sometimes includes recipes with the produce.**

rally Grown, a system that is monitored by farmers. Because of the federal regulations, a lot of us farmers really haven't chosen to [go through the process to] label ourselves organic, although I consider the names mean the same things."

The Scharkos truly enjoy sharing the bounty of their garden. Linda said, "It makes you feel good that your produce is going home with people who appreciate it. We have our regulars who show up every week and get their bag of arugula. Children run around with a carrot in their hand and [it seems to be] a whole different thing than what they saw in the [grocery] store." **IN**

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