

# Plant City: The town that strawberries built in central Florida

By CHIP CARTER

PLANT CITY, FL — For millennia, indigenous peoples of eastern North America savored a small, sweet fruit called *Fragaria virginiana*. In South America, a larger but less flavorful fruit, *Fragaria chiloensis*, grew.

Two hundred years ago, French explorer Amédée-François Frézier brought home five samples of the South American plant. In 1740, the first version of what is recognized today as a typical strawberry was bred in Brittany, France, combining those plants with stock from the wild North American strawberry.

Two centuries later, the strawberry industry was in full bloom in Plant City, FL, a small town in eastern Hillsborough County (set midway between Tampa and Orlando) that happens to be the winter strawberry capital of the world.

Ironically, the town was not named for its agricultural roots. Henry B. Plant was the man who brought railroads to central and western Florida, and Plant City was named in his honor.

The town was founded in the mid-1800s on the site of an old Native American village, Ichepucksassa, a name it bore until 1864 when a disgruntled postmaster changed it to Cork in honor of his hometown in Ireland. Originally a cotton center, Plant City's fortunes flourished after farmers slowly switched to growing strawberries sometime between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century.

A sizeable percentage of the people in Plant City today earn their living in pursuits directly related to the strawberry industry, which pumps almost \$300 million into the local economy each year — about \$10,000 for every man, woman and child



A former armory, this building served as headquarters for the annual Florida Strawberry Festival until this year, and is currently being renovated as a museum.



They start young in Plant City: 3-year-old Macy (last name withheld by request) ready to snip a berry from a hydroponic pot at Parke Family Hydrofarms.



A worker serves up one of Parkesdale Farm Market's famous strawberry shortcakes, enjoyed by presidential candidates and VIPs since 1956. The image on her shirt is the late Roy Parke, an industry pioneer who once shipped berries to the queen of England.

in the town of 32,000. The area provides 15 percent of the annual U.S. strawberry crop, and almost all U.S. winter strawberry production is centered within a 30-mile radius of Plant City. The 18 million flats produced last year, laid end to end, would stretch from Plant City to Seattle and back.

Plant City is the town that strawberries built, and evidence of that is everywhere. Subdivisions and shopping centers bear berry-related names. Roadside stands dot the thoroughfares, including Parkesdale Farms Market, founded in 1956 and a perennial stop for presidential candidates and other VIPs; a current display features photos from recent visits by President Obama and his 2008 opponent Sen. John McCain. Parkesdale is the largest family-owned strawberry and citrus market in the state, and thousands of visitors stop by each year to sample its famous strawberry shortcake.

In 1933, there were 11,000 acres of strawberries in production in Plant City. The fruit was so inextricably tied to the local economy that from 1928 to

1954, children attended school from late March — the end of the strawberry season — until December, when harvesting began again.

In 1930, business and civic leaders banded together to launch the first Florida Strawberry Festival, an annual celebration of the harvest held each March, which will observe its 75th anniversary this year. The festival grounds are a permanent fixture year round, and the two-week event (scheduled for March 4-14 this year) draws thousands.

The Southeast Tourism Society lists the Florida Strawberry Festival ([www.flstrawberryfestival.com](http://www.flstrawberryfestival.com)) as one of the region's top 20 annual events, and it is ranked among the top 50 fairs in North America.

Locals and visitors throng the midway for thrill rides, games, top-name entertainment (past performers have included Willie Nelson and George Jones, while this year's lineup features two-dozen big names such as Bill Engvall, Aaron Tippin, the Oak Ridge Boys, REO Speedwagon, Mel Tillis, Michael W. Smith and Lynyrd Skynyrd) as well as tons

of strawberries in every imaginable fashion, most-famously in gut-busting helpings of shortcake.

The festival is a unique slice of Americana and a testament to the bond between the community and the industry that supports it.

"None of this would have happened without human intervention," said Ted Campbell, executive director of the Plant City-based Florida Strawberry Growers Association, tipping his hat to the French botanists who made the strawberry viable two centuries ago.

The Florida strawberry industry "just grew up in Plant City, and it stayed here," said Sal Toscano, who heads SunnyRidge Farm's Florida strawberry operation and who has worked in the area for two decades. "If you're going to be in the Florida strawberry business, you have to be here."

"The industry settled in Hillsborough County. The soil was rich and sandy, it drains well, it's very unique," said Mr. Campbell. "Farmers even 20 miles away from here think theirs is bad dirt for strawberries."



The local product on display at a Plant City Sweetbay supermarket.