In an asphalt lot behind a Security Pacific Bank, nestled among street signs and parking berms, a rural tradition is sprouting in the heart of the city.

From Escondido, Fallbrook and Temecula, farmers drove to the corner of El Cajon Boulevard and Marlborough Avenue yesterday to set up San Diego's newest -- and most urban -- farmers' market.

The mounds of fresh produce and buckets of flowers cut an attractive if unfamiliar picture among the banks, furniture stores and insurance offices in one of the city's busiest business districts.

"When you're from outside you think of the city as just one big block," said Mary Hillebrecht, presiding over a display of asparagus and eggs from her farm in Escondido. "But this really has a nice neighborhood feel."

Although the market just opened last weekend, word has spread quickly. Some of yesterday's customers came from as far away as La Mesa and Point Loma.

"It's the freshness," Doris Mahlum said, explaining why she drove down from Kearny Mesa. "And the people. It's fun to get out on Sunday."

Mahlum needed a little education in fresh produce, though, which Hillebrecht happily provided.

"We've always said the fatter they are, the tenderer they are," she said, wrapping two large bundles of asparagus for Mahlum. "But when they're this fresh, it doesn't matter much."

Area businesses hope the market will draw more shoppers, while residents, dismayed by the growing crime rate in the City Heights neighborhood, hope the market will become a nexus for more wholesome weekend activities.

"This is a healthy addition," said Lee Anderson, who lives a few blocks from the market. "It's a lot better than prostitutes."

The vendors, all of whom are individual farmers, said the best part of selling in a farmers' market is talking to the customers.

"I love being out here and explaining about my produce, that it is healthy for you," said Joe Rodriguez, an organic farmer from Escondido.
And business is brisk at farmers' markets these days.

"Middle-class people, they're looking for bargains," said Ted Proios, a citrus farmer from Temecula. He pointed to his table laden with bright orange and yellow fruit. "This stuff, we picked yesterday. You can't get any fresher than that."

The market is sponsored by the El Cajon Central Business Improvement District. David Schmeiser found it by accident during his regular 6-mile walk, towing his two young granddaughters in tandem carts hitched to his Siberian husky, Bishop. Schmeiser bought a bunch of red carnations.

"This is probably going to become a regular part of our Sunday routine," he said.