

The Packer

Miniature watermelons face market hurdles

By David Mitchell

(Feb. 7) Little melons can be a big challenge.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported Jan. 8 that one-layer cartons of miniature seedless watermelons entering south Florida from Guatemala were \$8-8.50 for 6-8s and \$7-7.50 for 9-10s.

"They've been disappointing marketwise," said Lou Kertesz, vice president of Fresh Quest Produce Inc., Pompano Beach, Fla. "There's a lack of interest and over supply. Break-even is over \$10, and we're below that."

Kertesz said Fresh Quest has limited supplies of offshore mini melons from mid-November through May.

"We don't plant enough to affect the market," he said. "We just have supplies to complement our melon program."

Plant City, Fla.-based Santa Sweets Inc. axed its line of miniature Mexican watermelon, honeydew and cantaloupe after last fall's crop.

The company had offered the supersweet, organic mini melons for three years.

"We had a high brix melon, but there's a lot of stuff on the market," Santa Sweets president Don Long said. "When the market overcomes flavor, what do you do?"

Long said the program also suffered because of government regulations related to importing Mexican cantaloupe, which became difficult after a series of salmonella outbreaks in 2000, 2001 and 2002.

"It was too much of a hassle," said Long, whose company was certified to import Mexican cantaloupe.

Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Distributors, Nogales, Ariz., was more optimistic about wee watermelons. He said his company's Mexican mini program is growing 5% each year.

"It's a good winter melon," he said. "It's small, so you're not wasting it. You can stick it in your refrigerator. In the warmer months, it's hard to compete because regular watermelons are a featured item. For value, you can't beat conventional seedless."

Marketing director Lee Anne Oxford, said L&M Cos. Inc., Raleigh, N.C., is still working to perfect its offshore mini melon.

"It's an expensive crop that's hard to grow, hard to grow right and make money on," said Rex Lawrence, director of sales for Timco Worldwide Inc., Woodland, Calif. "A lot of farmers think that if they can grow watermelons and cantaloupe they can grow mini melons. This is the fifth year for us, and we're still learning."

Central American Produce Inc., Pompano Beach, Fla., has offshore miniature watermelons from January through April, said president Michael Warren.

"We have a small mini program," Warren said. "We're still getting into it. The jury is out on that. At the moment, the price is lower than normal. We're trying a small program to see how it goes."



The Los Angeles-based Giumarra Cos. sources minis from Mexico from late January into June, said Nick Rendon, sales manager of the company's in the Nogales, Ariz., office.

Rendon said peak volume will be in April and May.

"We've done years of tests," he said. "We think we've finally found the right variety."

Elsewhere, Frontera Produce Ltd., Edinburg, Texas, is in its second year of tests with mini watermelons from Mexico, said Ken Nabal, vice president of sales and logistics.

Nabal said the season started in December and will run into April.

"Success has been very good," he said. "The melons have been very good. We just haven't gotten the volume we need. We're tinkering with getting the right seed variety."