

Marketers maintain interest in tropicals

By Abraham Mahshie
Special to The Packer

In tough economic times, tropical fruit suppliers are relying on Asian and Hispanic consumers as dependable purchasers of the category, even to the point of offering new items.

"Tropicals that a lot of people think are specialties are mainstay items by a lot of Hispanic and Asian customers," said Mark Vertrees, marketing manager at M&M Farms, Miami. "It's not a specialty to them — it's a staple to them for a lot of those products."

Mark Falkner, director of sales for limes and tropicals for L&M Cos., Raleigh, N.C., said he thinks tropicals are picking up in demand right now due in part to the surge in interest for Asian fruit and mangoes.

"Hispanic areas are a good place pretty much to target, but there are other areas," he said. "The East Coast right now has really picked up."

Mary Ostlund, marketing director of Brooks Tropicals Inc., Homestead, Fla., agreed metropolitan areas are a strong revenue-generator, but, she adds, "we are seeing it seep through" to rural communities outside of the traditional population

centers for ethnic groups.

"Obviously, if you've got a good size Hispanic community, you're looking for Hispanics," she said. "But (tropicals are) gathering favor among all demographic groups."

Growth areas

Robert Schueller, director of public relations for World Variety Produce, Los Angeles, said the lychee, a grape-like fruit with a leathery, peelable skin is common in Asia and gaining attention now in the U.S.

"Lychees are actually a popular fruit in the Asian cuisine," he said of the fruit imported from Mexico, Taiwan and Israel. "Now they are pretty much crossing over to mainstream Americans through Asian cuisines or fine drinks and liqueurs."

Schueller said Thailand-grown mangosteens have also seen about a 25% increase in demand over last year, the first year the fruit was offered.

He added mangosteens are penetrating most major cities and Asian stores provide high demand, but high-end foodie-type stores are also providing the specialty tropical.

Jessie Capote, vice president of operations and co-owner of J&C

Tropicals Inc., Miami, said a less obvious fruit — the plantain — is also growing in sales.

"What's new is just maybe the plantain has taken really the forefront for us," he said. "It began picking up speed a couple of years ago and demand continues to increase."

Capote said though predominantly a Hispanic commodity, use in fried chips and at restaurants is helping plantains make headway among Anglos.

Eddie Caram, general manager of New Limeco LLC, Princeton, Fla., said mamey continues to be a very popular item that not only sells well among Hispanics, but also Asian and Polynesian communities.

Caram said more often than chain stores, mamey is in food markets and ethnic grocery stores, but it is available at Americana grocery stores in Baltimore as well as Publix and Winn-Dixie supermarkets in South Florida.



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Growers promote colorful tomatoes

By Don Schrack
Staff Writer

The fresh produce rainbow has long displayed eye-catching colors. It has been only recently, however, that fruit and vegetable growers have developed commodities with nontraditional hues.

There are blue apriums, bright red corn, purple artichokes and multiple colors of carrots and cauliflower. Not to be outdone, the tomato category now finds its venerable reds sharing shelf space with yellow, orange and even brown relatives.

"It's a really curious-looking tomato, and sometimes curiosity is a great thing," Monique McLaws, marketing manager for Ladera Ranch, Calif.-based Dulcinea Farms LLC, said of the company's Rosso Bruno brown tomato.

The decision to market the brown-skin, brown-flesh variety was not based on the fruit's color.

"What was most intriguing about this tomato was the flavor attributes," McLaws said. "The Rosso Bruno consistently provides the balance between the sweetness and the acidity

"They don't have the same flavor characteristics as the reds. They have their own unique flavor."

Jeff Dolan
DiMare Newman

that really bring out the tomato flavor you remember from home grown."

Now in the third year of marketing Rosso Brunos, sales continue to increase and Dulcinea Farms remains committed to the variety, McLaws said. It also is committed to the challenge of educating the public about the commodity's unusual color.

"The consumer acceptance is there, once shoppers understand the variety," she said. "And once consumers try it, they love it."

Not all nonred tomatoes have been sales successes. Oceanside Produce Inc., Oceanside, Calif., was convinced it had a winner a few years ago when it began growing and marketing a yellow tomato, said Bill Wilber, president and director of marketing.

"We had about 7 acres, and it was great," he said. "The next year

we went to 30 acres and destroyed the market."

Oceanside Produce is no longer marketing the yellow variety.

DiMare Newman, Newman, Calif., continues to market a limited supply of low-acid yellow tomatoes primarily to retail, said Jeff Dolan, field operations manager.

"They don't have the same flavor characteristics as the reds. They have their own unique flavor," he said, "and it's a wonderful color complement to a salad or other uses."

A cause for concern at DiMare Newman, Dolan said, is that grower-shippers are developing more and more varieties of tomatoes, but the category's overall volume is not increasing.

"The yellow tomato deal is a good market but a limited market," he said.

The disappearance of nonred tomatoes from Oceanside's inventory does not mean the company has abandoned any thought of marketing different colors of tomatoes, Wilber said.

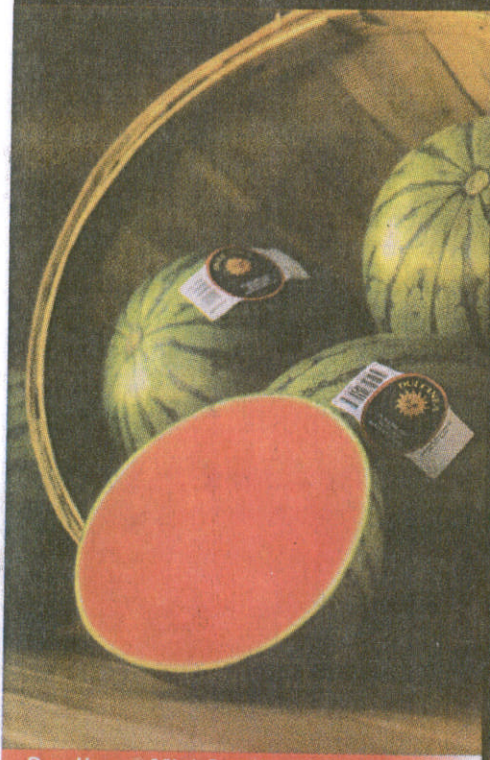
But any commodity must have the potential for profit.

"Retail likes to have them (the nonred tomatoes), but they're not going to move tremendous numbers," Wilber said.



YEAR-ROUND VALUE

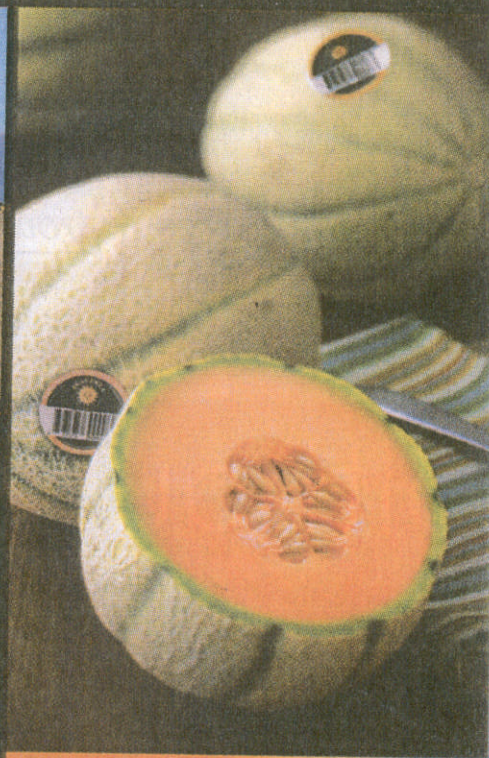
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