

Consumers favoring smaller melons

By Abraham Mahshie
Special to The Packer

Double-digit growth in mini-melons is boosting an otherwise flat watermelon category, but some growers wonder if the premium will hold up against a value-focused consumer.

"I think that the consumer is really catching on," said John McGuigan, vice president of sales and marketing for Dulcinea Farms LLC, Ladera Ranch, Calif. "Scan data is telling us it's the fastest growing part of the watermelon category."

McGuigan said seedless watermelon sales year on year are relatively flat, but the personal size melon is an increasingly attractive option.

"I think there's basically two companies that dominate the category and that's us and Dulcinea and we both have experienced growth, and we will continue to," said Rex Lawrence, director of sales and finance for Timco Worldwide Inc., Woodland, Calif. "I think it is, in a word, portions."

Lawrence said with baby boomers aging and shrinking households, people want less wa-

termelon, but they still want watermelon.

"I don't think they think they are paying a premium for a mini," he said. "With a mini-watermelon for \$3-4 or \$5 tops depending on where they're at in the country, depending on the freight, I think it's a real value."

Timco is shipping from southern Mexico, Honduras and Panama, with commercial quantities for the first time in some newer growing regions.

Michael Warren, president of Central American Produce, Pompano Beach, Fla., said Central American Produce grew some mini-melons last year, but he feels the market is too saturated by the big growers.

"At this point there is more value in the whole watermelon," he said. "People are buying halves and slices and those sales have increased in the winter, and mini-melons have increased slightly, but not much."

Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Co., Nogales, Ariz., said he is increasing acreage every year and has 50 acres of minis and 400 acres of conventional watermelons growing in Sonora, Mexico, this spring.

"We've been seeing them growing every year, but I am getting more demand for it. People are requesting them," he said, adding that initially it was difficult to secure seeds on the proprietary minis. "To me, personally, it would be a great winter melon, and not as costly. (Customers) want it and they want us to grow it."

