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Mini-melons latest fashionable trend

By Paul Bugarino,

MANTECA — For those in the watermelon trade, less is more. A small, sweet version of the traditional summer treat has become the darling of the fruit market. Consumers seem to prefer a personal sized melon that takes up less space and doesn't seem to weigh a ton when you lug it home or to a picnic. In 2006, mini-watermelons captured 8.5 percent of the U.S. market, said Kenton Kidd, a retail merchandiser with the National Watermelon Promotion Board. It's the fastest-growing segment of the market, he added, jumping 24 percent from the previous year. In the San Joaquin Valley, where watermelons are a cash crop in areas like Stockton, Manteca, western Fresno County and Bakersfield, growers are cognizant of the rising popularity. "The consumer demand is always changing, so we have to grow commodities that are most appealing to consumers," said Bruce Blodgett, executive director of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau. Monique McLaws understands that well. Her company, Orange County-based Dulcinea Farms distributes the mini melons to local grocery stores like Safeway, and looks for ways to enhance certain other fruits. Dulcinea's minis — which weigh between 4-7 pounds and only have an eighth inch of rind — were created by a very unique germ plasm by their parent company Syngenta, McLaws said. "They are sweeter in flavor throughout the entire melon, plus you truly get so much more out of product," she said, adding that extensive consumer research went into the creation of the mini seedless watermelon. "Lots of people showed a dissatisfaction with watermelon being so large. It's heavy to transport, they discard a good portion of it and the middle wasn't great tasting," McLaws said. McLaws says their "Pure Heart" brand has been exceptionally well-received, especially by middle-aged women, those with small families, and "empty-nesters." Local farmers are slowly adapting to growing and distributing personal-sized watermelons. "We've been doing some growing of the mini, but very little," said Ryan Van Groningen, a sales manager at Manteca-based Van Groningen & Sons Co. "The majority of our business is still in growing regular and seedless watermelons." Van Groningen said he's observed the increase in the demand for miniature melons, noting that it makes sense for people with limited space in larger cities such as San Francisco or Oakland or those who have a hankering for watermelon in the winter months. Jefferson Lowe of Corona Seeds in Camarillo, thinks worldwide demand for the minis is now 15 percent of the total market. European demand helps bump it up, he said. "Will market share grow? That is the question," said Lowe, who has predicted the rise of the mini watermelon since the 1990s. While Europeans have long liked small melons, they only caught on in the United States in the early part of this century. "The actual idea and the genetics has been around quite a while," Van Groningen said. "Recently, consumer interest picked up. Back in the day, small watermelons were around, but they weren't popular." With the harvest season over, farmers such as Parry Klassen of Selma are making plans for double or triple plantings of these minis. He's not sure if he'll grow much more than this, though. He has a problem that affects the general mini market: The little ones cost as much to produce as the big ones. "Labor is just as difficult as with a regular watermelon. Growing, the picking cost, everything is the same," Klassen said. This year, he sold the minis for \$4 each, the same price as some of his larger watermelons. Predictably, some customers balked. It's these costs — along with development of new varieties, marketing and consumer demand — that influence the market share of minis. Farmers simply can't drop prices too low as supply increases. Miniature melons sell in supermarkets for \$3.99 to \$4.99, depending on the time of year, McLaws said. Overall, the prices farmers have been getting for their watermelon crops over the summer have been relatively poor, Van Groningen said. The low return is the result of overproduction from other states such as Texas and New Mexico, which usually have question marks about their production because of unpredictable weather. California may trail Florida, Texas and Georgia, but its farmers still harvested 6.4 million pounds of the fruit last year. The prices seem to be coming back up following Labor Day, Van Groningen said. Despite the increase in miniature watermelons, consumers will still have a need for large melons. "There's still going to be that desire to have a big watermelon with whole family at a picnic or outdoors," Van Groningen said. "I was going to a family get-together a couple weeks ago, and realized it would be awkward to bring a bunch of minis, I think there's a place for both," McLaws said.