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PRODUCE NOTES

April 21, 2003

CAN'T-ALOPE NOW, THERE'S A MELON ALERT

Even though it's only April, melon season has begun, and our melon buyer expects no major supply gaps from now through the summer season. The one significant exception is cantaloupe and other netted melons from Mexico.

Concerns over unsanitary field conditions and several *Salmonella* outbreaks has led the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to issue an alert on all cantaloupes coming into the U.S. from Mexico. The alert requires that all cantaloupes be detained due to on-going concern over *Salmonella* outbreaks. In some cases, other netted melons, such as Galia melons have been detained as well. So far, no organic melons have been implicated in any of the *Salmonella* outbreaks.

According to the FDA, there has been a problem with *Salmonella* on Mexican cantaloupe over the past three years. Last year, the alert was limited to one conventional label due to its connection with the death of two people and numerous illnesses traced to their melons. The alert has since been expanded, since random sampling by the FDA revealed positive *Salmonella* tests on melons from most growing regions. Once FDA inspectors find improved sanitation practices, and random testing reveals no salmonella, the alert will be lifted.

Salmonella is an organism that can cause serious, sometimes fatal, infections in young children, elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems. Healthy people infected with salmonella experience severe flu-like symptoms. Cantaloupes are a problem because their rough netted skin can harbor bacteria and other organisms more easily than smooth skinned melons. With all melons, it's best to play it safe and wash the melon before cutting it.



MELON UPDATE:

Most of the organic melons we carry from Mexico are coming out of three areas: Baja Sur, Guimyas, and Mexicali. New Harvest expects their supplies to last through May, Covilli says theirs will go on well into June. At that point, the California supplies from the desert will be well underway—perhaps even winding down, and the Bakersfield area will be starting up.

Watermelons: Steady supply of Red Seeded and Seedless, less steady supply of Sugar Baby, Yellow and Orchid varieties.

Melons: Steady supply of Honeydew and Orangedew; Sharlyns are expected to start this week; Golden Honeydew and Crenshaw expected this week although supply may not be constant through May.

Netted Melons: Galias and Ananas are limited due to the melon alert.

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YOU'VE DONE IT!

YOUR LETTERS AND CALLS MADE A DIFFERENCE!

Once again the organic community has shown the power of grassroots activism. Several weeks ago we asked you to write or call your representatives and senators asking for a repeal of a rider contained in the federal Omnibus Appropriations Bill that weakened organic livestock feeding requirements. Last week, the rider was officially repealed and the integrity of organic standards remains intact.

The Organic Trade Association (OTA) worked hard to rally forces in Washington and at the grassroots level to get the support needed for the repeal. Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the OTA said, "Congress has done the right thing to repeal Section 771. The organic industry and consumers can breathe a sigh of relief and rejoice that this issue has been put to bed in a timely fashion. It truly was a bad egg, but legislators now have disposed of it".

We received calls from several legislators saying they had heard from you on this matter. Members of Congress have noted once again how remarkably vigilant and organized the organic community is, and this can only help us in the future when we need their support again.



ASPARAGUS: GROWING THE GRASS

Like extra large blades of grass, asparagus sprouts straight up from the ground, vibrant green and single-minded. Its conical tips are really a cleverly disguised *apical meristem*, the growing point for the whole plant. Once they open and unfurl their ferny leaves a large plant is born—much different to look at than the asparagus we buy, sell and eat. Of course, the asparagus we eat is cut before it leafs out.

The job of the ferns is to make carbohydrates from the sun's energy and store it in the plant's underground root system or crown. These crowns are well sized and produce delicious tasting asparagus for up to 15 years. When growers plant asparagus they plant crowns; they don't start by seed or transplants.

To start a field, tractors dig holes or trenches and set down crowns about a foot apart. Well-drained peat soils, like those of the Sacramento Delta region, are ideal because they are moist and fertile. The first few years of growth yield few asparagus that are left to fern and store energy for next year's crop. As the plants mature, yields increase, and the crowns will continue to produce for ten to twelve years. Other than compost, organic growers don't use much to grow asparagus. Occasionally, rust or asparagus beetle is a problem but rarely do they treat for these.

Harvest is tricky since the spears must be cut just below the ground and handled carefully. Old harvest photos show field workers, mostly women, lying stomach down on wheeled platforms drawn by horses. As they rolled across the field they'd reach down and harvest. A man on a horse drawn sled would follow collecting the asparagus. Nowadays, a tractor is used to collect the spears that workers on foot harvest by hand. A special long handled knife is used to cut through the soil and across the base of the spears.

Once harvested, the grass is rinsed and packed. Harvest can go on for several months but some asparagus is always left in the field to grow, produce ferns and energy for the next year's crop.