

Sweet treat: High-quality melons in demand

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Melons were a hot topic at the Texas A&M University AgriLife Research and Extension Center's spring vegetable field day held May 11 in Uvalde.

Kevin Crosby, a researcher at the center specializing in melon cultivation in Texas, presented his findings on the difficulties melon growers are facing and how these can be addressed. He spoke to participants both in the field and inside the auditorium.

FOCUS ON CONSUMERS

Speaking to the high demand for consistently good quality in melons, Crosby said 90 percent of consumers identify high sugar content as one of a melon's most desirable traits. The other concern for the consumer is cost effectiveness.

"It is tough to have something cheap that tastes good," Crosby

said. "You can't grow any melon for 99 cents anymore."

What the market will bear goes back to consumers. If a consumer buys one melon that is not high-quality or not sweet, the chances of him buying another one are lower. Inconsistent quality reduces sales.

Like squash, melons are among the produce that consumers are reluctant to try if it seems out of the ordinary. Among melon varieties, cantaloupe and honeydew are most popular in Texas.

"It's a matter of introducing people [to something new]," Crosby said.

There is a growing interest among consumers for high-quality produce and a willingness to pay for it. It is a goal of Crosby's and his team of researchers to address the quality of melons from an economic perspective, to produce the flavor desirable among consumers in a manner sustainable for producers.



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Surrounded by melon plants, researcher Kevin Crosby explains to attendees the challenges facing melon production in Texas. The presentation took place during Texas A&M University AgriLife Research and Extension Center's Vegetable Spring Field Day held May 11.

According to Crosby, the Pecos area used to be one of the best places in Texas to produce quality melons. That production is now at 20 percent of its heyday. The Uvalde area has also lost 80 percent

of its once-vibrant melon production. Production in the Rio Grande Valley has also been hit, mostly due to disease.

Aside from economic pressures from consumers and disease, Crosby

noted that a big challenge to melon production in these areas is due to hot/cold extremes. "Melons grow better in a desert," he said.

OTHER CONCERNS

Another concern among consumers is food safety, something Crosby and his team are also working to address. Melons have been notorious for salmonella and listeria contamination, among other pathogens.

Crosby has found a linkage between the chemical make-up of a melon rind and its level of resistance or susceptibility to bacteria. Through genetic trait selection, he and his team are working to produce a melon that is resistant to bacteria. Through this process they are also selecting for higher sugar content and other desirable features.

"The idea is to provide better-tasting but safer melons," Crosby said.

"The whole idea," he continued, "is to come up with a new variety that is consistently high in quality. We want people to buy it because it's a Texas melon and it tastes good."