Export of rockmelons from the Ord River

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Markets

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Hybrid varieties are better looking melons than open-pollinated varieties. They are well netted with little or no sutures (veins), and resistant to fusarium and powdery mildew, two important diseases of cucurbits. They are also high yielding. The introduction of hybrid varieties has increased yields from 10 t/ha to 20 t/ha, and has extended the planting season to September.

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Past and present research

In 1982, the Department of Agriculture started rockmelon variety trials to examine possible improvements over the existing standard, open-pollinated variety Planters Jumbo.

Today, hybrid varieties make up three-quarters of commercial plantings. The Department is pursing its research into varieties to extend the growing season into weather that is not as favourable for growing fruit but during which good marketing opportunities exist.

The right variety must be planted at the right time of the year. When a variety is not suited to the season, fruit size is either too small or too large for the market. The fruit's external appearance, its flesh colour and texture, and even its flavour, can be badly affected by unsuitable temperatures.

Long hours of sunshine and relatively high temperatures result in a planting to picking time that varies from 65 to 85 days, depending on the time of the year and variety grown.

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The Ord River Irrigation Area can supply 20 to 50 per cent of the Australian winter market for rockmelons. The reliability of supply from the Ord River means that returns from the domestic market will depend increasingly on the quantity and quality of the northern Queensland crop.

To preserve their level of income, Ord growers must either increase their yield per hectare, or increase the area cropped. Yield increase is slow, while rapid expansion, in addition to the capital required, often leads to a decline in produce quality because management and quality control become more complicated. A third option to preserve growers' income is to supply export markets.

Export markets

Although overseas markets show the same trends as local markets, they can absorb much higher volumes without lowering prices. Growers who export rockmelons may maintain high prices on the local market by not oversupplying it for a short time.

The Ord River District Cooperative started exporting rockmelons in 1990 after a feasibility study and market assessment funded by the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Regional Development and the Cooperative confirmed the potential for export of rockmelons and honeydews from the Ord River Irrigation Area.

That year, the Ord River District Cooperative exported 9300 trays of rockmelons to south-east Asian markets. The Cooperative developed distinctively designed stronger cartons, fully impregnated with wax, in which to market melons. The following year, 15,000 trays were sold.

The most opportune time to export was from April to October. Competition was strongest during June, July and August, with prices fluctuating between $18.00 and $35.00 a tray.

In 1992, 26,000 trays of rockmelons and honeydews were exported, mainly to Singapore and Hong Kong. This amount still represents less than 6 per cent of the total production of the Ord River Irrigation Area.

Although Kununurra is 850 km by road south of Darwin and 3500 km by road north of Perth, Ord River growers export from Perth.

When the Ord River District Cooperative started exports of melons to south-east Asia in 1990, it soon discovered that Darwin had a limited number of flights per week to Asia and less frequent scheduled road connections to meet these flights.

Three years later, Perth is still a better choice for many other reasons. Ord growers often have fruit in transit or on the market floor in Perth. This fruit can, by arrangement, be diverted to export sales. Perth also gives growers access to a greater variety of export destinations.

At present, growers are advised to form an export group instead of trying to export individually. Successful exporting involves a regular supply of constant quality; it often involves quantities beyond the production capacity of an individual.

Developing export markets

Recent market research has uncovered many opportunities for northern Western Australia to export its rockmelons and honeydews to south-east Asian markets, though it has to compete with northern Queensland - the Burdekin in particular - and with the USA.

The Department of Agriculture has taken an active role in helping growers develop the melon export industry by establishing a quality assurance program. Growers who export must adhere to well-defined quality standards and adopt a strict quality control system so that overseas customers recognise that the best quality melons come from northern Western Australia.

The Department is testing different varieties of rockmelons to find the best for export. It is conducting research to overcome post-harvest disorders, such as chill injuries and disease, that can occur during transport. In some cases, the cause of a disorder is on the farm, in others it is triggered by bad storage during transit.