

Melons²

Christine Coker



Courtesy of BBC

By Bob Ratliff

Anyone who has ever tried to stack watermelons has probably thought to themselves, “Wouldn’t it be great if these things were square?” It’s an idea that’s caught on in Japan, where small, square melons command premium prices—more than \$80 each; about triple what traditional

round melons cost in Japanese produce markets.

Is there a place for square watermelons in the normally round U.S. market? Some producers think so, and that’s why MAFES horticulturist Christine Coker is studying production of the cube-shaped fruit at the Beaumont Horticultural Unit in Perry County.

“In Japan, the advantages to square melons include ease of transportation and storage in compact home refrigerators,” Coker said. “For truck crop farmers in south Mississippi, they’re a marketing tool.”

People will stop and look, she added, at a roadside produce stand that has square melons, and even if they don’t buy a square one at a premium price, they’ll likely purchase an old-fashioned round one.

Proper “training” is the secret to growing square watermelons.

“At fruit set, the melons are placed into a square- or rectangular-shaped container,” Coker said. “As the melons grow, they take on the shape of the container and are harvested when the container is filled, usually in about 90 days.”

The MAFES researchers are working with several small varieties, including “Yellow Doll” and “Tiger Baby,” that aver-

age about 5 to 15 pounds when mature. Japanese farmers use tempered glass containers to produce their square melons, but in 2002 Coker and her assistants at the Beaumont Unit experimented with several less costly types of boxes, including wood, Plexiglas and plastic. Their best success so far, however, has come from placing the young melons in the openings of plain 8-inch cinder blocks.

While there could be some economic benefits associated with the reduced shipping and storage space required for square melons, Coker said the biggest near-term benefit for Mississippi growers will likely be increased consumer interest in their traditional product.

“Large-scale square watermelon production may never be economically feasible for our producers because of the additional labor and materials required,” she said. “But our research has drawn enthusiastic local interest, and we have heard from producers in other parts of the country that having some square melons on display does give a produce stand a marketing advantage.”

Research into the production aspects of square melon production is continuing at the Beaumont Unit. Once optimum production practices are determined, economic feasibility will be studied and the Garrison Sensory Evaluation Laboratory at Mississippi State will measure consumer acceptance.

The research at the Beaumont Unit is supported by the USDA Agricultural Research Service through a MAFES internally competitive Alternative Crops and Value-Added Products grant and by a William White Special Project Award. The White Awards were established in 1988 by the now deceased Oktibbeha County dairy farmer to benefit Mississippi agriculture and agribusiness.