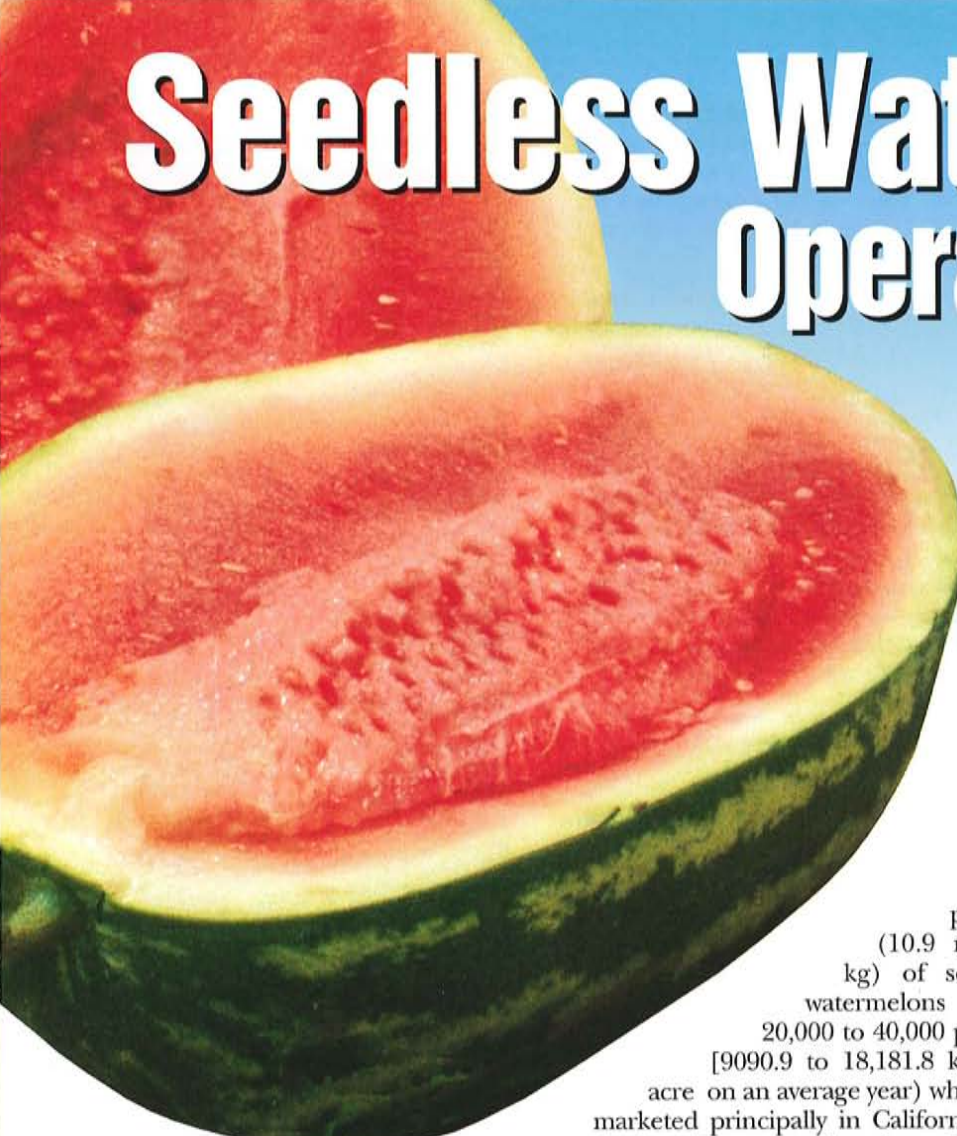


Seedless Watermelon Operation Finds Sweet Spot in the City



little bit bigger, made more contacts and knew more people. It just kind of took off."

According to Johnson, the seedless variety of watermelons was developed by O.J. Eigsti in the 1950's, while working with the chromosomes of onion roots. "He's still alive and comes down to see us every now and then," Johnson noted.

This sterile hybrid (a planted watermelon that must get the pollen from another watermelon) became a viable crop nearly 10 years ago. "Every year it gains a percent of the whole watermelon market," Johnson said. "It's really done well in the last four or five years."

The Johnsons hand raise two million young plants in their 12 greenhouses at their headquarters in the early spring.

pounds (10.9 million kg) of seedless watermelons (about 20,000 to 40,000 pounds [9090.9 to 18,181.8 kg] per acre on an average year) which are marketed principally in California and the East Coast, as well as through Sam's Club stores.

City living is the last thing to come to mind when imagining the dry, windy, sandy-soiled farmland of North Central Texas.

But city living is exactly what Dwayne Johnson has in mind when he heads out to check on his 800 (or more) acres (324 ha) of seedless watermelons.

"The seedless watermelon was made for people in the cities so they don't have the seeds or rinds from a big watermelon to dispose of when they get through with it," Johnson explained, noting that the seedless variety are considerably smaller (approximately 16 to 18 pounds [7.3 to 8.2 kg]) than traditional watermelons which weigh in around 25 pounds (11.4 kg). "There's not a lot of waste."

The Johnson Melon Corporation, located in Knox County, Texas, found this niche market and ran with it. Now Johnson, along with his father Donald, produce approximately 24 million

The Johnsons' family operation began years ago when Dwayne's great-grandfather dabbled in growing watermelons. Then, a little more than 25 years ago, Dwayne and Donald picked up where "great-granddad" left off.

"We started looking for something different besides just the regular wheat and cotton which just weren't working that great for us," Johnson said. "My dad started with a garden-type operation here and it just caught on. Every year we just got a



Dwayne Johnson (right) and his father, Donald, show off a healthy seedless watermelon vine. In the background, their Zimmatic pivot clears the rye windstrip.

About 1,700 to 1,800 seedlings per acre (.4 ha) are planted in straight rows using a riding transplant machine. "We transplant out in the field around the first of April depending on the weather forecast. We start harvest around the first of July and wrap up harvest by Labor Day."

The Johnsons also plant between 60 to 100 acres (24 to 41 ha) of cantaloupe and seasonally rotate wheat and stocker cattle in the winter.

"When we get through with our watermelons, we start getting ready to sow wheat," Johnson explained. The Johnsons keep busy for the rest of the year sowing their wheat in the fall and getting cattle in late November.

Conservation is a priority for the Johnsons' operation, specifically through land-use rotation and utilizing buffers. "We never go back on the same ground two years in a row," Johnson said. "It rotates excellent with wheat."

Johnson continued, "We plant all our watermelons in what we call wind strips." These rows of rye serve as windbreaks for the sensitive watermelon plants.

"This is real sandy country that we farm. If we get a rain, we usually get a lot of wind after it. The wind strips help us protect from the sand and also helps in setting the fruit during the spring when it's windy," Johnson said. "It gives us a little bit of protection."

These unique plantings require the right irrigation equipment. Of the Johnsons' 22 pivots, 12 are Zimmatic. They use drop hoses to efficiently water



The Johnsons use drops that are long enough to reduce wind drift but high enough to clear the protective windstrips.

the plants while still clearing the taller rows of rye.

"We prefer the long drops," Johnson said. "They're probably hanging about two to three feet (.6 to .9 m) off of the ground and that works well in our wind strips."

Depending on the weather, the Johnsons irrigate once every seven to 10

days. "We try to do a lot of our watering at night to avoid evaporation and the wind," he explained. "Most of our pivots are set up on half-circles and we'll go over the melons once, putting on seven-tenths to one inch (1.8 to 2.5 cm). If it is really dry and hot, we'll reverse it and go over it once more during the day."

Johnson is pleased with his Zimmatic



An efficient loading and trucking system allow the Johnsons to distribute the seedless watermelons to retailers all over the nation.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Through conservation-minded farming, the Johnson Melon Corporation has made a profitable business by raising seedless watermelons.
- ◆ Seedless watermelons are smaller than traditional melons with seeds, making the perfect melon for city folks.
- ◆ A vital marketing and distribution system contribute to the Johnson's success.
- ◆ Long drop hoses reduce wind drift and evaporation.

pivots as well as the service he receives from his dealer, Gary Kuehler. "They're a really good machine," Johnson said. "We don't have a lot of trouble with them at all and when we do, Gary works with us and gets stuff done pretty quick."

But to truly profit from the seedless watermelon market, healthy plants are a priority. The Zimmatic pivots on Johnsons' farm help prevent the spread of perilous diseases.

"Watermelons are real susceptible to diseases," Johnson explained. "Splashing water will spread a disease in a watermelon field quick."

The minimal splashing and absence of drag hoses, along with a spraying program, has contributed to the Johnson's ability to keep disease under control.

The Johnsons' business is successful, not just in terms of production and sales. The Ft. Worth Star Telegram newspaper awarded Johnson Melon Corporation the top honor for watermelon/cantaloupe production in the state of Texas.

That's something to appreciate on the farm – and in the city.



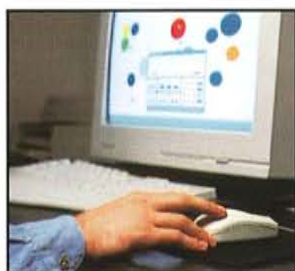
A seedless melon still must come from a seed. The Johnsons hand raise two million seedlings in their 12 greenhouses.

FYI

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