

the  
**vine**line

January/February 2006



Official Magazine of the NATIONAL WATERMELON ASSOCIATION

# SEEDS!



PRESORTED STD.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
TAMPA, FL 33634  
PERMIT NO. 6210

# SEEDS!

## The beginning of great things to grow

The creation of anything starts with an idea, a thought, a dream or some type of a creative ideal that many times evolves into something nurtured, developed and bought by consumers. All of the products that we purchase today started somewhere with an idea in mind. Depending on who you are talking to, it may be the lightbulb, sliced bread or canned beer. Who would have ever thought that a very little seed could grow a Watermelon, a huge piece of delicious fruit.

Feedback from the grower community indicates that there is an emphasis by the seed industry to meet the needs of their customer - the growers - better than ever before. And, knowing that more change is coming (and needed) on the horizon.

You might compare this relationship between the seed industry and watermelon growers to the old fable, Humpty Dumpty. We all know that when Humpty fell off of the wall, all of the King's Men put Humpty back together again. They were there to help Humpty be as good as new, and back on his feet in times of trouble. The seed industry has done that with watermelon growers, and continues to strive to be even better.

Humpty  
Dumpty  
Art

Times are changing. Consolidation in the seed industry has been going on for ten years and is beginning to slow. Genetically modified seed is being developed, and in some cases has become a controversial issue. Some seed companies are taking a regional or market approach to customer service rather than a national, one-size-fits-all method. All in all, the seed industry is doing business differently today. The approach seems to be, if it ain't broke, then let's break it and determine a better way for the future.

### CURRENT TRENDS

As the seed industry has slowed its long run of consolidation, it has created numerous changes, advancements and trends as a result. Some of the higher ranking results are:

- Improved disease resistance in new commercial hybrids
- Increased demand for Seedless varieties.
- Grafting for improved disease resistance.
- Increase in demand of high quality seed that is disease free.
- More variety (sizes, shapes, colors) and higher quality.
- Consumer interest in nutrition (i.e. lycopene)

Let us take a look at what some seed industry companies have to share relative to the current trends that they see in the seed industry, especially as they relate to the Watermelon industry:

“The seed industry is just finishing the consolidation process that started 10 years ago. Now we see dedicated seed companies to the watermelon industry”, said Meir Peretz, Harris Moran Seed Company.

Lisa Zaglin of Abbott & Cobb suggests, “Being able to supply on a twelve month basis has finally hit the produce (watermelon) industry full in the face. Because of this desire to supply for a long window, the grower / shipper groups need an array of seed varieties that allow for the highest quality fruit. The challenge is to provide varieties that meet growers’ needs for yield while meeting consumers’ need for quality.”

“Plant Programs are a growing trend with several of our suppliers who offer plant programs designed to



eliminate guess work and shortages on the watermelon grower's part”, suggests Arlen Wood of

Seedway, LLC. “With the new plant programs you get what you order”.

A changing trend within the industry is how some companies go to business today. For many, many years it was a national seed catalog that attempted to be all things to all people. Now-a-days, some companies are changing with a different approach.

Siegers Seed Company has been using a regional marketing approach for eight years. Rick Siegers adds “Growers are more sophisticated than ever, and the competition they encounter demands that we offer products specifically tailored to their needs.”

## CHALLENGES

There is an old saying that says ‘nothing is easy’. The great golfer, Booby Jones, said, “If golf was easy, then everyone would do it”. No matter whether you are talking about the game of golf, developing the next advancement in seed, or growing watermelons, a truer statement may not ever be said. It isn’t easy, but the dedication is surely present and evident.



There are a great many challenges to the watermelon industry, and as a result, the seed industry. Amongst them are similarities to a list of challenges facing the grower community. Do you see any similarities below?:

- Disease solutions, prevention and resistance

- Cost of doing business (labor and land availability)
- Retailer emphasis on ‘economy of scale’ vs. consumer demand
- Disappearance of the small farmer
- Residential development of farm land

Lisa Zaglin of Abbott & Cobb states, “The single largest issue facing the watermelon industry today is the VINE DECLINE issue. This one problem is being attacked by academic and private sectors with no resources being spared.” We have previously published a Vineline feature story about Vine Decline, and continue to move forward with our scientific research partners to find answers and solutions. “Identifying the causative agents for diseases such as Vine Decline” is the most important to the industry, says Paul Sawyer of Siegers Seed Co.

“Disease resistance is one of the major issues facing the seed industry with watermelon”, suggests Rebecca Catlett from Nunhems.. “We must develop varieties that are resistant to fruit blotch, gummy stem and the new ‘vice decline’ diseases affecting our watermelon crops.” “The main challenge is seed health to produce seed free of pathogens”, said Meir Peretz of Harris Moran.

Susan Hadley of Syngenta Seeds adds, “The cost of doing business is a significant issue for most companies large or small. Strong financial oversight is a must as research and product development costs continue to increase.”

## INDUSTRY CHANGES

As the consumer of watermelon changes, so must the Watermelon industry. That creates a rippling effect with every industry, including seed, that suppliers/partners with our industry must pursue. The consumer will continue to change; Change their preferences for size, flavor, firmness,



vitamin content, packaging (how they buy it (whole, sliced, fresh cut, etc.) Our industry also changes its needs from our partnering supply industry with disease resistance, new varieties, improved color, flavor and firmness, and so on. How does the seed industry help us to meet consumer changes and keep up with our needs?

During the past ten years, there has been more significant change in the seed industry than ever before. “Most of the varieties grown commercially today are less than 10 years old, adds Lisa Zaglin, Abbott & Cobb. “This trend shows the evolution of the industry as a whole. Along with these variety changes has come a defined marketing change. The industry has begun to embrace a promotion to the consumer and not just to the growers.”



“The seed industry is becoming more aware of consumer demands and needs”, suggests Rebecca Catlett, Nunhems.. “We are becoming more involved with down stream marketing and working with producers, shippers, fresh cut operations and retailers to supply the consumer with new and better products”.

Susan Hadley, Syngenta Seeds, adds “Seedborne disease issues are more understood. Transplant producers and growers are more educated, and as a result, the risk for outbreaks has dramatically decreased.”

“The seed industry has many more new varieties that have been developed, tested and released in the last ten years than in the prior ten”, adds Tammie Nelson, Hollar Seeds.

## **POLLENIZERS**

As the demand for seedless watermelon by consumers increased across the years, the seed industry responded by creating new varieties and methods for growers to meet that

new, growing demand. Some growers continue the original method of planting a seeded variety alongside seedless varieties in the field, and create pollination effectively. Other growers utilize one of the numerous pollinators available today from some seed companies to create a higher yield of seedless watermelon.

There are different types of pollinators and planting styles today, but in the end, the industry responded to consumer demand and grower need to have the tools to be able to respond.

“By using a pollinizer this eliminates the use of seeded watermelons for pollination, thus having a larger percentage of seedless melons per acre and no seeded to have to deal with”, suggests Arlen Wood, Seedway.

Rebecca Catlett, Nunhems adds, “The pollen supply must come from a more economical and grower friendly source. New, improved pollenizers that supply pollen over

longer periods of time, with better disease resistance and less competition with the seedless plant are headed to the growers.”

With pollinators comes advice from seed companies which can help to maintain growing fields from year-to-year with minimized opportunities for weed or disease issues. “Growers need to practice good rotation, plow under production fields and destroy emerging volunteers in the next season. The practice could address any concern about developing a cucurbit seed/weed bank that may harbor disease and attract pests”, comments Tammie Nelson, Hollar Seed.

## **THE FUTURE**

Grower needs that will help them to respond to changing consumer choices will continue to evolve in the coming years. In the past they have by creating pollenizers, new varieties, disease resistance, improvements in exterior and interior qualities, higher yields and ease of production. The preference for size, shape and





ring patterns will change again and again. Tammie Nelson, Hollar, adds “All it takes is one new outstanding variety to send ripples through the marketplace.”

What could become the next generation of watermelon seed? The responses that one may get from seed companies might seem to be far-fetched, but in fact are things that are very good possibilities in the not too distant future. As research dollars are invested by the seed industry into technology and product advancements, these ideas begin to come to light, and eventually reality. It is almost a dreamer’s dream coming to life.

Arlen Wood, Seedway, suggests “Parthenocarpic varieties will not need traditional pollination from bees. It is standard practice in other cucurbit crops such as cucumbers.”

“In the not too distant future we may supply a seedless plant that does not require and outside male pollen source,” adds Rebecca Catlett, Nunhems.

## **CONCLUSION**

The seed industry invests tens of millions of dollars into research to develop a better seed for growers,

making those changes to help to meet the ever-changing demands of consumers. They are responding to their customer, the grower, as the grower would to their customer, the consumer. This type of an effort creates a three-legged stool effect of partnership and response.

The ultimate goals by the seed industry are postured to partner with the watermelon industry to grow varieties that consumers want with high quality, disease resistance, cost effectiveness and are grower-friendly. The future holds much promise. Just let your mind wander and quite possibly the idea may already be in the works.



*Our thanks to the contributors to the feature story from Abbott & Cobb, Harris Moran, Hollar Seed, Nunhems, Seedway, Siegers and Syngenta. Thank you for your input and pictures. They were very helpful in the effort to write a complete story and cover a lot of ground.*

*Special thanks go to Abbott & Cobb, Hollar Seed, Nunhems and Syngenta for placing Ads to accompany the feature story on the Seed Industry in this issue of The Vineline. As we continue to develop this series of articles about affiliate industries, your support will allow us to continue the effort and provide new information to our membership. Thank you from all of us at the NWA for your support.*

# SEEDS!