

Laurel auction opens its 44th season

LAUREL, Del. — Roadside market operators, owners of small grocery stores, and others looking for supplies of fresh-picked local watermelons, cantaloupes and assorted produce, will find both quality and quantity at the Laurel Auction Market in Laurel, Delaware. The farmer-owned "Block" opened its 44th season this Tuesday.

Though harvest has been delayed somewhat because of the cold, wet spring, market manager Dave Horton says cantaloupes grown on plastic are starting to come in. "Last year's opening date was the 14th," he said, during a recent interview. "We sold over 27,000 cantaloupes the first day. We also have, or soon will have pink tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and crimson sweet watermelons and sugar babies for sale."

According to Ed Kee, University of Delaware extension vegetable specialist, the Laurel Block offers a good, dependable supply of

melons and assorted vegetables for roadside market operators. "Buyers can bid on any amount, from a tractor-trailer load of watermelons to part of a pickup truckload," he says.

Kee has been showing local growers how to use plastic mulch and drip irrigation in order to advance harvest as well as improve yield and quality of fresh market crops—especially melons—and the idea appears to be catching on. He and extension agent Derby Walker plan to be on hand at the Block every Tuesday and Thursday this summer to answer farmers' questions.

The Laurel Auction Market is operated by the Southern Delaware Truck Growers' Association, a farmer cooperative organized in 1940 to bring buyers and sellers together for mutual benefit. Starting with a modest membership of 200, the association has grown to nearly 1,600 members. Nearly \$2.5 million worth of



John Dickerson, left, president of Southern Delaware Truck Growers' Association, and Jim Hastings, one of the directors, stand in sales shed of Laurel Auction Market. Both farmers are longtime supporters of "Block."



Truckloads of Delmarva-grown produce move through sales line at Farmer's Auction Market in Laurel, Delaware. The only one of its kind on east coast, the "Block" is a major outlet for midseason watermelons and cantaloupes.

produce — primarily watermelons and cantaloupes — is sold there each summer. Besides roadside stand operators and owners of small grocery stores, many large produce brokerages also buy regularly.

At the peak of the season, over 100,000 watermelons are auctioned off each day at the Laurel Block, which is located within a day's drive of most major mid-Atlantic cities. As a result, produce from the Block is cheaper to haul and fresher when it reaches its destination. Buyers are guaranteed quality, since a federal inspector is on the grounds at all times. Horton says small buyers can usually get what they need and be on the road by noon.

To reduce waiting time for both farmers and buyers there is a sample sale each morning at 8:30 when growers can bring in pickup samples (25 melons each) for inspection and grading. These samples then become the basis for bidding on entire tractor-trailer lots to be loaded at growers' farms.

The Delmarva peninsula is a major source of midseason melons. Kee estimates Delaware alone grows about 2,100 acres of watermelons. Counting those from Maryland, the Block draws from about a 5,000-acre supply. Many of the watermelons sold are trucked to wholesale markets in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore,

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Block manager Dave Horton, left, and John Dickerson, president of Southern Delaware Truck Growers' Association, exchange memories of early days of Laurel, Del., Farmer's Auction Market. Horton started loading watermelons there when he was 15; Dickerson's father was one of eight founding members of the market.



At peak of season, 100,000 watermelons a day are sold through Delaware's Laurel Block — a major clearing house for Delmarva-grown melons. Bulk of fruit is trucked to Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and other major eastern cities, but there's plenty of roadside markets and small grocery stores in the region, too.



Prospective buyers consider load of cantaloupes ready to be auctioned at Delaware's Laurel Block.