

Farm Talk

by
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Roadside markets offer tremendous potential to area farmers and consumers. But I'm afraid much of the potential is being lost. As a result, consumers pay more for fruits and vegetables that are less than farm fresh and farmers wind up wholesaling produce that could have gone directly to consumers.

The roadside market scene in this area is a mixed bag, and because of that consumers aren't spending nearly what they might. Consider my own experience. I had occasion to be in downstate Delaware and wanted to offer some of Delaware's fine fresh produce to my visiting relatives from England. Delicious sweet corn, red ripe tomatoes and one of those big juicy watermelons. The perfect midsummer additions to an otherwise excellent meal. And so I stopped at one of those nice little roadside stands that seems to be run by a farmer and would therefore be offering fresh farm produce. I bought the best watermelon they had — according to the saleslady — the most expensive tomatoes and a dozen good ears of corn.

The prices were okay, not any tremendous bargains, but I anticipated that the prices would be secondary to the taste. I wasn't really bargain shopping, I wanted good produce. Well, at the risk of sounding like a restaurant critic, I must say the sweet corn had excellent taste, but the ears were small and not filled out very well

on the smaller end. The tomatoes were overripe, soft and tasteless. And the watermelon was a disaster. It was obviously overripe, dry and mushy inside, and was deemed unfit to serve.

So much for eight bucks worth of fresh farm produce. I couldn't have done any worse picking a supermarket at random and taking what they had to offer. At least I could have returned the produce without making a 40-mile drive.

Herein lies the nub of the problem when it comes to getting farmers and consumers together at a roadside stand. First of all, the shopper must make a special trip, sometimes several miles from home. Then there's the matter of quality. How can the buyer know if the watermelon is in proper condition? That the ears of corn don't have any worms, and that the tomatoes are fresh? What good is a guarantee when the stand is many miles from home?

Roadside stands have the potential of offering farm-fresh produce of the highest possible quality directly to the consumer. That means eliminating all those middlemen and all of the quality-damaging delays required through the usual market channels. Consumers know that and so they anticipate better than supermarket quality and less than supermarket prices — two options that are certainly within the realm of possibility. After all, why shouldn't a farmer be able to sell high quality produce directly to the

consumer at a little better price than what would be found in the grocery store? I don't think consumers expect great bargains, but they do want the prices to be a little less and certainly the quality to be the very best.

A friend of mine who runs a roadside stand in Pennsylvania does quite well in an out-of-the-way location because he and his family guard the quality of their produce very carefully. The sweet corn is picked each morning bright and early and all that doesn't sell is discarded. Everything that's sold comes off the farm, or in the case of ice cream, honey and potatoes, it's made quite clear that they weren't produced on that farm.

But even then assurances of quality are there. A money back guarantee is not really worth much to the consumer who goes to that particular roadside stand. It's probably 10 miles from the nearest town on a secondary road that goes to nowhere. The homemaker who stops for sweet corn and tomatoes goes considerably out of her way to

get there. To have to repeat the trip just to get her money back would be an imposition, and in fact would probably mean the end of her shopping expeditions.

Many roadside markets operate the same way. Their owners know that farm-fresh quality is what they really have to sell. And so they guard that reputation very carefully. But other stands are less concerned with quality and repeat business, being content to get what they can while the customer is in the store and let tomorrow take care of itself.

I'm firmly convinced that the old merchandising adage "let the buyer beware" will not work in roadside marketing. There are other alternatives. A consumer who spends six or seven months a year buying produce in a supermarket doesn't have to shop the roadside markets, and probably won't unless to encouraged by price, quality, convenience, or some other strong incentive. I also suspect that one bad roadside marketing experience is enough

for many consumers so that they turn away from all roadside stands. By the same token, a positive experience opens up the opportunity for other roadside stands.

This mutually beneficial strategy brings me to this point: Delaware needs a roadside marketing certification program that assures consumers that those participating farmers are selling homegrown produce that is guaranteed fresh. That the market operators subscribe to a code of ethics and that they are certified by a regulatory agency as to merchandising standards. A properly designed certification emblem could then serve as an advertising device that would assure shoppers that a stand displaying the certification sign would be up to par when it comes to quality, cleanliness, fair merchandising practices, and so on.

There is tremendous potential in roadside marketing. Hundreds of thousands of consumers who would spend large sums of money for the bountiful produce of agriculture.

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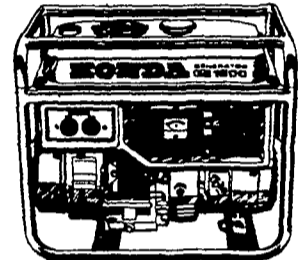
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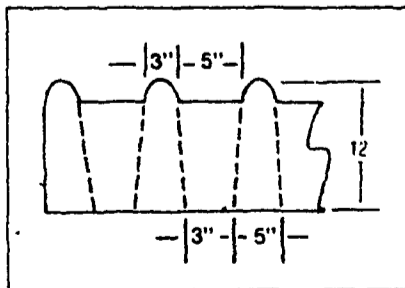
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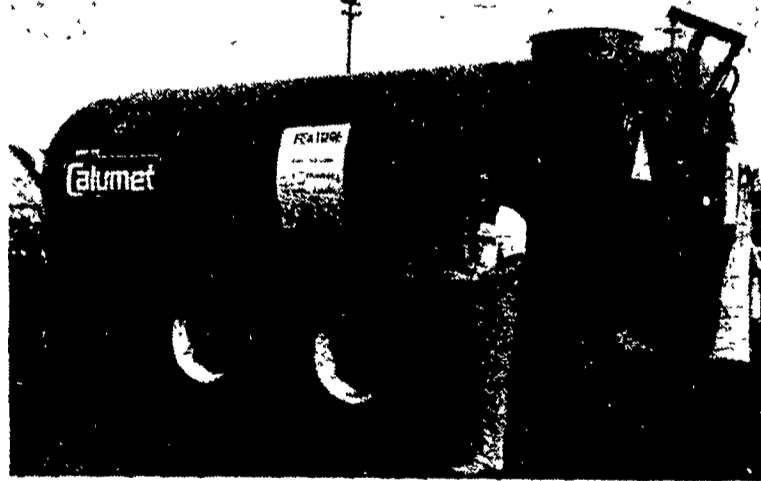
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