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Wada Farms diversifies into seasonal veggies

By

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Wada Farms got its start three quarters of a century ago growing and shipping world-famous Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes and grew into one of the largest producers and shippers of potatoes in Idaho. In the process it diversified into other Russet varieties, then a wide assortment of other colors and varieties of potatoes, not only from Idaho but from Colorado and elsewhere.

Adding onions to the mix, Wada Farms soon became well-established as a year-round onion shipper, sourcing from Idaho, Oregon and various other production areas.

So, being big in potatoes and onions, it just made marketing sense to expand into sweet potatoes. It was something customers wanted, and involved working with growers on both coasts, but primarily in North Carolina

Today, Wada Farms Marketing Group LLC is not only well-established in sweet potatoes but is several years into a watermelon program that is rapidly expanding and is nearly year-round.

Going from sweet potatoes to watermelons might seem like a leap at first blush, but when sweet potato growers also grow watermelons and customers are asking for them, it's a natural move.

Now those same marketing forces have motivated Wada Farms to diversify even further, adding several seasonal vegetables such as butternut squash, asparagus and sweet corn to its offerings. "We will be adding and growing substantially in those commodities," said Kevin Stanger, president of Wada Farms Marketing Group.

"Wada has been fortunate to have a positive name in the industry. Some of our customers have asked if we could help them acquire some of those items. They say, 'if you ever have some good connections for a lot of these seasonal vegetables let us know,' so we have made some inroads in being able to provide those for our customers," Stanger said.

The vegetables are being grown in various locations from North Carolina to Florida. Wada Farms has dabbled in those items a bit in the last year or so, but this year, the program is "really expanded, hopefully exponentially. It is really going to enlarge our commodity program out of all those areas, and we are excited to see the growth," he said.

The geographic distribution of growers throughout the Southwest will provide an extended season for the commodities. The products will be marketed nationwide but primarily in the midwestern and eastern parts of the country.

Wada Farms has hired a husband-and-wife team, Fran and Susi Torigian, who have been partners in their own produce marketing operations in Florida for several years. They will be based in Wada Farms' North Carolina office. Fran Torigian, a 44-year veteran of produce marketing, got his start in 1977 at OK Produce in Fresno, CA before becoming sales manager at Tri-Produce in Firebaugh, CA. He later formed his own brokerage company, Torigian Marketing LLC.

"The Torigians bring a wealth of knowledge and information on sweet potatoes, watermelons, asparagus, quash, corn, and some of the other commodities that we are just starting on. So, we are really excited to have those two with us," Stanger said.

Wada Farms will feature its entire line in its exhibit at the SEPC Southern Exposure in Orlando, FL, April 6-8.

Wada Farms is participating in the show because "there are a handful of our customers that will be there," Stanger said. "We thought it would be worth the effort to get out and try it, so we will be exhibiting."

Stanger will be attending the show and working in the Wada Farms booth as will Wada Farms Vice

President Joe Esta, the company's Texas sales rep, Dave Barton, and Fran and Susi Torigian.

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