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**Wada Farms continues to expand watermelon program**

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By

Keith Loria

May 22, 2023

[Wada Farms](#) is a family-owned farming operation that is celebrating its 80th year in business in 2023. What began with 160 acres of potatoes has turned into one of America's largest grower-shippers-marketers of potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes.

In 2016, Wada Farms added watermelons to its mix and what started as a niche program located in North Carolina has now become a strategic alliance of growers/partners in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, South and North Carolina, Delaware, Michigan, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

"When Wada first started getting into watermelons, it was more as an afterthought in the fact that some of the retail customers buying potatoes and onions sometimes needed watermelons, so Wada would go out and try to find them for that customer," said Fran Torigian, vice president, new business development and sales for the Idaho Falls, ID-based company, who along with his wife, Susi (category manager of watermelon), came on board in 2021.

"Since we came on board two years ago, we've taken the watermelon program from just finding watermelon to being proactive, putting contracts together with retailers and foodservice cutters and taking the initiative to put programs in place, before the season even starts," Torigian said. "That way, we have a commitment level for our business partner, who is our grower. We're vested with the grower and customer and have skin in the game."

Additionally, to keep watermelon as a year-round product, Wada Farms has also developed grower partnerships in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica.

"Watermelons in the East Coast division is probably about 50 percent of what we do, so it is significant," Torigian said. "We take that category with seeded and many seedless watermelons and that encompasses our program at this particular point."

The company has seen production increase by about 20 percent in the past year, and there are now 10 cold packers part of Wada's watermelon program.

One of the reasons it has been so successful is that someone is not sitting at the home operations in Idaho handling the program, but is on the East Coast (Raleigh, NC), which Torigian calls the "epicenter" of watermelon.

"It's a great place to be with our growers," he said. "We have an office in Oregon, we have an office in Texas and one in Colorado, but this office in North Carolina I think is a true value and a secret for the success of our program."

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Wada has long been known for superior customer service, and that's something that has also helped the watermelon business thrive.

"It doesn't matter if it's someone calling looking for one bin of watermelon or someone who is a big buyer, they get the same service level," Torigian said.

With the Florida watermelon season finishing up soon, the company will switch to Georgia in June, followed by North Carolina, Delaware, Indiana and Michigan for the rest of the summer. Mexican watermelons will come in through November.

"There are some people who want the Mexican melons versus the domestic melons, and that's because of the food miles and being a cheaper delivered cost," Torigian said.

This year, Wada is working on its first watermelon program in Panama, which will provide it with a new source in the winter months and help it service more customers. Wada is also initiating a program with North Carolina State and a program with the USDA research station in Charleston, SC, as it is looking for a seed variety that it can call it's own. One that's more of a crimson color and has more of a crunch, so it can offer a patented variety soon.

"There's no doubt about the fact that watermelon is a hot product and is reasonably priced, so I see great growth potential in watermelon," Torigian said.

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## About Keith Loria |

A graduate of the University of Miami, Keith Loria is a D.C.-based award-winning journalist who has been writing for major publications for close to 20 years on topics as diverse as real estate, food and sports. He started his career with the Associated Press and has held high editorial positions at magazines aimed at healthcare, sports and technology. When not busy writing, he can be found enjoying time with his wife, Patricia, and two daughters, Jordan and Cassidy.

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