

# Good melons require time and special attention

**I** DID NOT grow melons on my farm in 2012. It was the first year I hadn't grown melons since 1980, the year I bought my farm. My CSA (community supported agriculture) membership had increased in such a way that I did not have enough labor to pick all the expanded crops in a timely manner.

I needed to cut out one crop, so I chose melons because I had received more complaints on their pricing than any other crop and it was also my least profitable crop.

Except for seedless watermelons, all the melons I grow are heirloom melons. Heirloom melons have been around for many decades, and my favorites are ambrosia and super star cantaloupes, and sugar baby watermelons.

Heirloom melons are known for their much superior, sweet flavor. The newer varieties of hybrid melons have much larger yields and can last for weeks under refrigeration. The cost of production of these newer melons is very low per melon because of phenomenal yields and



## ON THE FARM >>

EMMETT SNEAD

little loss to being overripe.

Therefore, over the years the price of these newer melons has gone down at the big stores. This makes my melons appear to be overpriced. It's all about what you want to put in your mouth.

We pick watermelons—during the growing season of (mid-July through August)—every three days, so that each watermelon is perfectly ripe. Cantaloupes are picked every day in July through mid-August.

Large factory farms pick a watermelon field one time. The newer hybrid watermelons have been bred for the whole field to get ripe mostly all at once, providing huge yields. When it's determined the field is

mostly 80 percent ripe, then all the watermelons are picked at one time.

This cuts labor costs dramatically. But 20 percent tend to be on the green side of ripe and another 20 percent tend to be somewhat overripe. Efficiency and economies of scale can take a toll on the delight of personal living and healthy eating.

Last year, while running the roadside stand, my daughters would explain why we weren't offering melons. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that the majority of customers would be willing to pay more for heirloom melons than the ones they had been buying.

None of my customers could find ambrosia cantaloupes anywhere else. One of my best customers, upon hearing that we were not growing ambrosias, got so upset that "she had a fit and she fell in it," saying as she left, "I know where you sleep at night."

This year my daughters will be

growing heirloom melons and especially ambrosias. They have decided to take the heirloom melon business on as their own special business. They'll be responsible for growing, picking and selling all the melons. They will do this in addition to raising laying hens and running the roadside stand. With their help we will have heirloom melons for the summer, picked in a timely manner.

Emmett Snead operates Snead's Farm along Tidewater Trail in Caroline County.

