

Stop thumping: Here's how to tell when melon is ripe

Each Wednesday, the *Journal Star* offers a taste of something that awaits you at the next Haymarket Farmers Market, and a look at some of the people behind the stalls. The Haymarket Farmers Market is held every Saturday morning.

BY KIMBERLY SWARTZ
Lincoln Journal Star

Melons are the mysteries of the summer.

Supermarket shoppers thump, shake, sniff and squeeze the fruit, hoping to learn the secrets hidden within the thick skin.

Is it ripe? Too soft? Too sweet? How can you tell?

Farmers Market vendors Andy and Tannie Daniels of Columbus and Justin Heldt of Yutan can answer those questions. They have the inside scoop on picking out a perfect piece of fruit.

"It's much easier to determine if a melon is ripe in the field than in the store," said Andy Daniels. "Shoppers can smell and thump the melon, but choosing the right fruit is sometimes just a guess."

Daniels picks his cantaloupe and watermelon the day before the market; Heldt rises at 5:30 a.m. Saturdays to gather his superstar muskmelon, which doesn't keep as well as watermelon.

Daniels and Heldt pick only when



the melons are ripe on the vine.

"If you buy a melon at the store, it's usually green and you have to let it sit for a few days," Heldt said. "Our melons are so sweet and fresh they're ready to eat right away."

It's hard to tell when a watermelon is ripe, Daniels said. The only sure-fire way is to cut the fruit open.

But in the field, Daniels and Heldt look for these clues:

- The melon will have a glossy finish.

- The tendril, which is short and curly and attached to the vine, will be dry.

- The watermelon will snap off easily from the vine.

- The underbelly of the fruit will turn from a white to a cream color.

- The watermelon will be ribbed.

In the store, you can tell if the watermelon is overripe by



TED KIRK/Lincoln Journal Star

■ **Fresh picked:** Tannie Daniels (right) and her daughter, Kelli, sell melons from their Columbus farm at the Haymarket Farmers Market.

thumping it. If there's only a dead sound (no vibration), put the fruit back. Chances are it's overripe.

With cantaloupe and muskmelons, thumping should produce no noise at all. If you do hear something, the melon is starting to break down.

Daniels can tell that a cantaloupe

in the field is ripe when the vine starts cracking and the fruit pops off. The melon is not ripe if the stem must be removed forcibly from the fruit. In the store, look for cantaloupe and muskmelons that are slightly soft at the end opposite the stem. Those are usually the sweetest ones.

Do not refrigerate a melon until it has reached the right stage of ripeness, Heldt advised. Once cut open, the melon should be refrigerated immediately.

"Midwestern-type melons like at the Farmers Market are usually sweeter and better than any other kind," Daniels said.

Heldt added: "They taste great on a warm day and are a perfect summer treat."

Here's a cantaloupe recipe from the "Vegetarian's A to Z Guide to Fruits & Vegetables" by Kathleen Robinson with Pete Luckett.

Cantaloupe Ice Cream

- 1 medium cantaloupe, flesh removed from rind
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- ¼ cup honey
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 cups whipping cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Cut fruit into small pieces and puree it with lemon juice in a blender or food processor. In a separate bowl, blend honey, sugar and cream. Add melon puree and vanilla. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Pour mixture into ice-cream maker and freeze according to manufacturer's instructions, or pour it into large square pan, cover with foil and put it in the freezer for four hours or until firm, stirring two or three times. Make 2 quarts.