

AG ALERT[®]

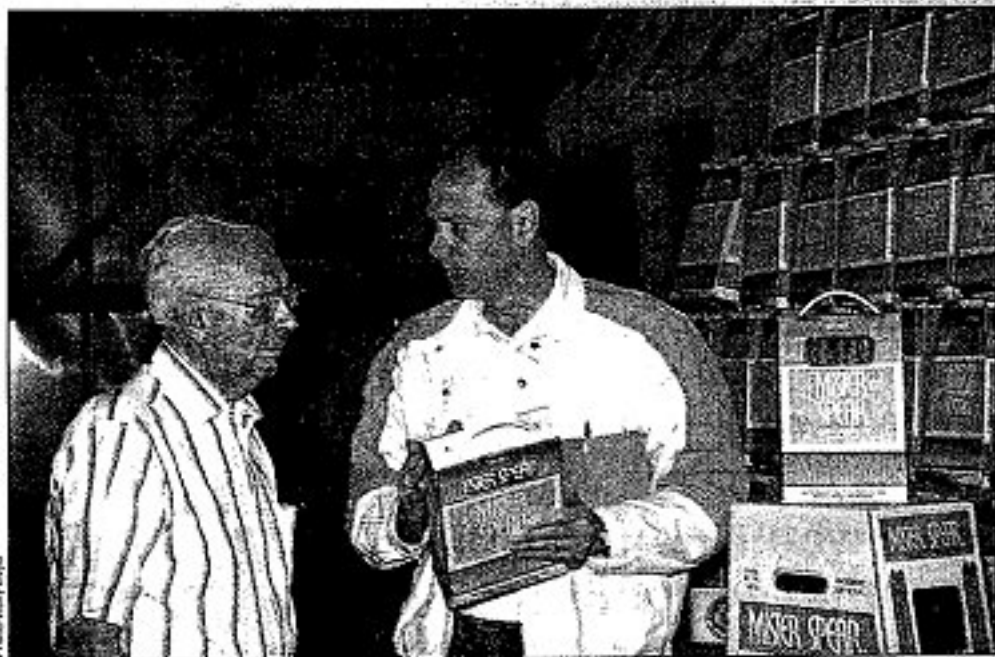
The weekly newspaper for California agriculture April 1

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A Special Grower Section

CALIFORNIA
VEGETABLES[®]



Instead of flowers, just send bouquet of Delta asparagus

By Vicky Boyd
Assistant Editor

When a woman from Eau Gallie, Fla., wanted to fete friends in nearby Melbourne recently, she called Chip Arnett to mail order a box of Delta asparagus.

Sounds like peculiar gift? Not so, says Arnett, president of probably the nation's only mail-order gourmet asparagus firm, Mister Spear, of Stockton.

"We have a variety of customers, but mostly anybody who just appreciates good food or is looking for a unique gift for a person who's got everything," Arnett said. "If you live here in California

QUALITY PACK—Tracy grower Armando Baldocchi, left, a member of the Mr. Spear board of directors, examines a box of asparagus held by Chip Arnett, president of Mr. Spear.

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and have relatives in the Midwest, it's a great gift. They're still shoveling snow in Colorado and here comes the express carrier with a parcel of fresh California asparagus."

Arnett has agreements with several large Delta asparagus packers representing about 20,000 acres. Graders on the lines know what Mister Spear wants, and they pull off the large spears at the beginning.

Arnett ships only jumbo, which by California standards must be at least 13/16-inch diameter, and colossal, which must be at least 1-inch diameter.

After being washed and hydrocooled, the asparagus is trucked to Arnett's repacking operation in Stockton, where workers cut off the ends and reinspect it for broken or crooked spears. They then pack it in specially designed shipping boxes—inserting cooking instructions and a recipe book—for pickup the same day by express carriers.

While most of the deliveries arrive the next day, Arnett guarantees customers will receive the asparagus within two days. "The success of our company is the produce is handled properly," Arnett said. "It's cut that day and the people are eating it in absolute prime condition. It's guaranteed fresh."

The most popular size is the 7 1/2-pound box, although Arnett also ships 3, 15 and 30-pound boxes. The 3-pound box costs \$22.50 including delivery, while the 7 1/2-pound package runs \$40 delivered.

Looking at the prices, some may accuse Arnett of profiteering, but he defends it, citing premiums paid to packinghouses for oversized asparagus, the labor-intensive repacking and the costly overnight shipping.

"My customers are paying for the very best, and they don't care what it costs," Arnett said. "For the price of a small flower arrangement, you can send asparagus."

Arnett also drop ships for several other gourmet mail-order firms, such as Mission Orchards and Omaha Steaks International. In the deal with Omaha Steaks, the beef company included an insert promoting Arnett's asparagus with its catalog to the more than 2 million customers on its mailing list.

This type of arrangement has been invaluable for Mister Spear, which does very little advertising except for a direct mailer sent before the start of the spring season. Like many other mail-order firms, Mister Spear also has a toll-free telephone line, but Arnett said they had to wait several years to obtain the numbers that spell 1-800-MRSPEAR.

The asparagus company, which now boasts a spring flier mailing of more than 25,000 and is incorporated, started out about 15 years ago when a couple of asparagus growers were trying to figure out what to do with the jumbo and colossal spears that most grocers won't buy.

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The oversized spears come from young 3- to 6-year-old plants, because only a healthy, vigorous plant can produce a spear that thick. Thinner spears come from older plants that may have been overworked or weren't dormant enough during the winter to recover.

About 85 percent of the Delta production, however, falls into standard or large size classes, which grocers prefer because they are assured a large, steady supply.

"Only a small percentage was jumbo, but it wasn't a big enough percentage to feature it in any retail chain stores. So it became a headache and frustration because we knew, as growers, the big stuff was really the best," Arnett said.

Many consumers, however, avoid thick asparagus because they've had bad experiences with tough, woody spears in the past. Arnett blamed that on improper care by grocers and packers.

"If asparagus takes one to three weeks from a ranch to a chain store, it stands to reason a certain amount of dehydration takes place," Arnett said. "You can't help it."

To prevent dehydration during the short trip, Arnett said Mister Spear likes to keep a 1/2-inch shipping seal on the end of the spear. When customers receive the box and begin preparing the spears, instructions tell them to cut about a half-inch off the end.