

# Produce supply down; price up

By NANCY AUSTIN

The official word from produce wholesalers at Detroit's Union Terminal is entirely optimistic.

"The supply (of fruits and vegetables) is ample, the quality superb, and the price — relative to last year — is the same or less," said Herb Abrash, owner and manager of Andrews Brothers of Detroit. "It's all ancient history."

But local retailers don't all agree with Abrash. Managers of area markets seem to have a common complaint. While there seems to be an ample supply, the quality is lower than usual. And in many instances prices are high.

There have also been problems with obtaining variety and people aren't buying quite so readily.

"Customers buy either for price or for quality. The people who shop here look for quality," said a spokeswoman at Joe's Produce Market on Seven Mile Road in Livonia. "But, for example, the price of an ear of corn is outrageous. We didn't feel people would be willing to pay 23 cents an ear, so we don't have any corn today," she said.

"We've had the most trouble with obtaining a variety of plums, too," she continued. "Where we normally may have four or five varieties of plums, we have only two, and the prices are higher."

DELMAR COCKRUM of Cockrum's Farm Market on Plymouth Road in Livonia agrees.

"We have an adequate supply, but everything is expensive," stated Cockrum. "The freight prices are higher so the price of the products are higher. But I have plenty of produce and fruit."

One observation made by Cockrum is that while he has an adequate supply, people aren't buying. He can't quite figure out the reason for this, but has a few ideas of his own.

"A lot more people are eating in restaurants today," he suggested, "and women are too lazy to cook. Or maybe they are waiting for the Michigan crops. This is the slowest start we have had since we've been in the business."

There are indications, too, that some of the crops will be late in arriving at the market. Michigan weather is responsible for that. Cucumbers and melons were lost in the first planting. These products will be about 10 days late in their arrival. Corn, too, may be a few days late.

Again, local retailers and vegetable stand owners don't anticipate a problem in getting the Michigan crops to the market. Many of them own their own trucks and haul their own produce directly from the growers whenever possible. There should be some easing in prices when Michigan products appear.

KEN DABELSTEIN, owner of Ken's Country Produce on Ford Road in Westland is one such person doing his own hauling.

"Our trucks are out right now hauling strawberries from Benton Harbor," he said.

"But the gasoline situation is making it difficult. At one point I was down to two gallons of gas. But I am selling the berries for 19 cents a quart and that's reasonable."

That's about the only good thing that Dabelstein had to say about the fruit and vegetable business. His supply has been affected drastically by the truckers' protest, he said, adding that prices are running 25-50 per cent above normal. For example, he said, "good" watermelons (the striped variety) are selling from \$3-\$5 compared to \$1.50 a year ago.

He says the only way watermelons are getting through right now is via independent truckers, who are willing to take a chance. "One trucker told me the situation in the south is bad. Truckers are lined up all along the freeways with flat tires because of the number of nails out on the roads. So when they do get a load through it costs more."

Last week, however, one encouraging fact was apparent. The price of a case of peaches dropped from \$12 a case to \$8 a case. Conjecture on the part of the retailers reveals that the California growers may have had a lot of produce they want to move.

One spokesman in the wholesale produce business said, "Some of those trucks cost over \$100,000 and they have huge payments to make. They can only hold out so long, then they had to start taking shipments."



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