

Organic herbs, garlic stay strong

By Jim Offner
Special to The Packer

A two-year economic slump and 10% unemployment have not put a dent in sales of organic herbs and garlic, suppliers say.

"It has gotten much better, actually," said Lolo Mengel, co-owner and general manager of Jessup, Md.-based Coosemans D.C.

Once a novelty, organic herbs and garlic have become standard fare on retail shelves, Mengel said.

"Several years ago, when a lot of chains were starting to request organic product, the supply wasn't there and there were often

shortages and we'd have to supply conventional," she said.

"But it seems the supply has caught up and rarely is there a retailer who wants conventional. They just expect the herbs to be organic."

A traditional knock against organics has been the price premium the category brings. That premium remains, but it isn't as dramatic as it was in the past, Mengel said.

"There is still, and there may always be one, but that gap has gotten smaller in the last few years," she said.

The demand for organic herbs and garlic grows every year, said Camilo Penalosa,

vice president of business development and partner with Miami-based Infinite Herbs and Specialties LLC.

"At retail, they are in high demand," he said.

Gilroy, Calif.-based garlic grower-shipper Christopher Ranch can't keep pace with the demand for its organic product, said Patsy Ross, vice president of marketing.

"We're increasing our growing of organic garlic by about 10% per year, and we still can't stay in it year-round," she said. "That's our goal: to stay in it year-round."

That goal comes with a difficult challenge, Ross said.

"You need to get enough

seed to grow it and find the viable organic land, and with garlic, you only grow it in the same soil once every four to five years," she said.

"Garlic is something we personally made a decision that we get better yields when we switch it up."

Los Angeles-based World Variety Produce Inc. reports garlic is a strong player in the organic market.

"In terms of garlic overall, the biggest growth has been in organic garlic," said Robert Schueller, director of public relations for the company, which markets products under the Melissa's banner.