

Summer Melons

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Summertime and melons go hand-in-hand. Whether it is watermelons or cantaloupes, or the less common honeydew, these members of the Cucurbit family grow well in Arkansas gardens, but they do need room to grow as they produce prolific vines.

Melons are tender, warm-season vegetables closely related to cucumbers and squash. Unlike squash and cucumbers which are eaten when they are immature fruits, melons require a longer growing season and are generally eaten when they are totally mature allowing the flesh to become sweet. The rind is tough but not hard and the flesh is always watery. Most are eaten raw but some are cooked, particularly in soup. All melons except for watermelons are *Cucumis melo*, the same genus as Cucumbers. These melons have thick walls and hollow centers containing loose seeds and fibers. Muskmelons (cantaloupes), honeydew, crenshaw, casaba and other more obscure melons are included in this genus species. Watermelons, although closely related, are in a different genus: *Citrullus lanatus*. Watermelons are of African origin and have solid, almost uniform flesh all the way through with seeds embedded in the flesh. Most melons will store at room temperature maybe a week and not much longer refrigerated.

By weight, watermelon is the most consumed melon in the United States, followed by cantaloupe and then honeydew. While most Americans call them cantaloupes, the true cantaloupe has a rough, warty outer skin and is rarely grown in the United States. Muskmelon is the true name, describing the aroma or musk of the ripe fruit. A ripe cantaloupe (or muskmelon) gives off a very sweet smell, however the honeydew, crenshaw and casaba, lack any distinct odor, making them more difficult to determine ripeness.

Melons can be grown in all parts of Arkansas. Melons are usually planted in the garden from late April through early June. Most gardeners plant them from seed, but these days, you can find transplants at local garden centers. Melons grow best in deep, well-drained, sandy loam soil with plenty of organic matter. Heavy soils with a lot of clay often cause small, weak plants that produce fewer melons.

You need four things to grow melons: sun, bees and water plus space. Many gardeners have avoided planting melons because of how much space they need to grow in. A standard melon patch can easily be twenty feet across or more. In the ground most gardeners plant watermelon plants 6-12 feet apart. If you don't have that much real estate to devote to growing melons, grow them vertically. Provide a trellis or even a chain link fence to grow on, but do be prepared to help them grow on the trellis—melons are poor climbers on their own, but using soft ties to hold the vines to the trellis, they can easily be trained to grow upwards. Once they begin to set fruit, you will also need to provide some support for the weight of the fruit—strips

of cloth, old pantyhose or more ingenious methods have been used. This keeps the fruit attached to the vine without pulling the vine off the trellis.

Melons are long season plants. Read your seed packet and it will tell you how many days from seeding to harvesting is needed. Typically you will need between 80 - 140 frost-free days for melons to fully mature.

As with all cucurbits, melons have separate male and female blooms on the vine. Honeybees must pollinate every blossom in order to have fruit. Poor pollination can result in small or misshapen fruit. Even though a melon has a normal shape, it will ripen at a smaller size and contain fewer seeds if it did not get fully pollinated. Flowers usually open shortly after sunrise. Female flowers are receptive to pollen throughout the day, although most pollination takes place before noon especially when temperatures are hot. The flowers close in the afternoon never to reopen, regardless of whether they were pollinated or not. Rainy and windy weather reduces bee activity, which can cause poor melon production due to inadequate pollination.

Fertilize melons lightly at planting and then side-dress when the vines begin to run. Another light application of fertilizer can be applied after fruit is set. Don't overfertilize, as too much fertility will give you excessive vines and less fruit and can impact the quality of the fruit. Moisture is most critical during planting and fruit set. Extremes in moisture (too much rain or extended drought) can cause melons to suffer, especially in heavy soils. Drip irrigation works the best, keeping the foliage dry. If you only have overhead irrigation, make sure you finish watering early enough in the day so the foliage can dry before the sun sets. Wet foliage overnight can lead to disease problems. Melons need adequate water during fruit set and development, but prefer it to be dry the last week or two of development. Two to three weeks prior to harvesting, start cutting back on how much water you give your plants. Plants may wilt some in the afternoon, but as long as they recover in the evening they have enough moisture to continue production. Too much rain or water can result in bland fruits or melons that split open. Drier conditions concentrate the sugars leading to sweeter fruit.

The fruit of the watermelon is one of the largest vegetables we eat. Watermelons commonly weigh 18 to 25 pounds, with the world's record melon tipping the scales at 350 pounds, although small-fruited "Icebox" varieties such as Sugar Baby and Tiger Baby are grown for individual consumption with some as small as 1-3 pounds at maturity. While we typically think of a watermelon as being pink or red, there are yellow, orange and even white fruited varieties. Watermelons can be round or oblong, solid green or striped, seeded or seedless (seedless watermelons are not actually without seeds, but the seeds are mostly immature, white and very soft when the melon is ripe.) Watermelons are 92 percent water and 8 percent sugar.

Most varieties of cantaloupes grown in Arkansas have salmon-colored flesh, but there are green and white fruited varieties. Cantaloupes or muskmelons have a netted rind and an average melon usually weigh between 3-5 pounds although varieties now produce much larger fruits—the record is over 64 pounds grown in Alaska. Honeydew is a round melon with an

almost white rind which may be slightly green or slightly yellow. The flesh may be white, pale green or pale orange, and firm.

Knowing when these melons are ripe takes some experience. For a watermelon, the outer rind should begin to dull, the curly tendril attached near the stem will turn brown and dry, and the underbelly should turn a creamy yellow. Once you have checked these methods, then thump away, since thumping is not a reliable determination of ripeness. Also knowing the average time a particular variety should ripen will also help you start looking—however, weather conditions and culture and care can shorten or lengthen the process.

For cantaloupes, most require about 30-35 days after the small fruits are set. Honeydew can take a bit longer. The outer rind of a cantaloupe will change color from a gray-green to yellow-tan, and the netting pattern will become more pronounced. The melon will also develop a crack where the melon is attached to the stem. If ripe, the melon should detach quite easily. You will also smell that typical musky, cantaloupe odor when the melon is ripe. Honeydews may or may not produce the crack at the stem, but should become much lighter in color--almost white in color, and the blossom end (opposite from the stem) should be somewhat soft when ripe.

Depending on when you plant, melons usually start ripening in Arkansas in late July to early August. Two festivals surround the watermelon—the 41st annual Hope Watermelon festival is August 10-12 and the 37th year Cave City Watermelon festival is August 11-13. So if you didn't plant any melons, visit your local farmers market in midsummer or check out one of these festivals.