

Growing Guide: Melons

If your idea of a melon is limited to the dry and mealy supermarket and buffet fare — usually under-ripe cantaloupe and honeydew — you've got a surprise in store! Fresh-picked and vine-ripened, sun-warmed and juicy, garden-grown melons are one of summer's tastiest treats.



Choosing Varieties

There are so many types and varieties of melons to choose from. You'll enjoy the best selection if you grow plants from seed, but a well-stocked garden center may have some unusual varieties to purchase as transplants. Here are a few options — but there are many more to try as well!

Cantaloupe: Round to oval with tan, netted rind and sweet orange flesh.

Honeydew: Round to oval with smooth, pale green rind and sweet white or green flesh.

Casaba: Round to oval with a point at one end; hard, yellow, furrowed rind with white flesh that is mildly sweet.

Crenshaw: Oblong with a flattened bottom and pointed top; yellow, furrowed rind with sweet and slightly spicy peach-colored flesh.

Charentais: Small, round with green-gray, ribbed rind; salmon-colored flesh is intensely sweet and fragrant.

Watermelon: Round or oblong, seedless or seeded, with red, yellow or orange flesh.

Other Considerations

Personal-size melons. Plant breeders have developed smaller versions of familiar melons, including cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon. Some of these are as small as a softball! They're ideal single-serving treats.

Hybrid or open-pollinated. There are some fascinating open-pollinated heirloom varieties, such as 'Moon and Stars' watermelon with delightful spotted rinds. You might consider starting with newer hybrid varieties that have some disease resistance bred into them. (Hybrid varieties are grown from seeds that are produced through a controlled cross between two different parent varieties by a plant breeder.)

Growing on a trellis. Training vines up off the ground saves space, increases air circulation (which helps prevent disease), keeps fruit off the ground and blemish-free, and

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makes harvesting easy. Trellising also makes weeding a breeze — an almost impossible task when vines are allowed to run over the ground. Trellising is easiest with small-fruited varieties, and gardeners have devised creative ways to support the fruit, such as using sections of pantyhose as slings to secure each melon to the trellis. Just be sure the trellis is sturdy enough so it won't topple in the wind or under a heavy load of fruit.

Site selection and Preparation

Melons are heat-loving plants that need full sun and rich, warm soil. Loosen the soil to a depth of at least 12" and mix in some compost plus a granular, slow-release organic fertilizer. To help the soil heat up faster, create 3'-diameter, flat-topped mounds spaced about 4' apart. Cover the area with black plastic to absorb the sun's warmth.

Raised beds are good choices for melons, because the soil dries out sooner and heats up faster in spring. Large planters are also good options, but the soil can dry out faster than in-ground beds, meaning you'll need to be extra mindful of watering.

Starting with Seedlings

In northern regions, it's best to start seeds indoors a few weeks before your average last spring frost date. Plan to set your seedlings in the garden about two weeks after the last frost date, to ensure the weather has settled into summer's warmth. You can also purchase transplants.

Whether plants are homegrown or purchased, it takes a week to 10 days to harden off transplants by gradually acclimating them to outdoor conditions. Place them in a sheltered location for a few hours the first day, and gradually increase their exposure to sun, wind, and the variable temperatures of outdoor life.

Plant three seedlings per 3'-diameter soil mound.

Sowing Seeds

In regions with long growing seasons, you can sow seeds directly into the garden. Plant five or six seeds about an inch deep, spaced evenly around each 3'-diameter soil mound. After two weeks, remove the weakest plants so you're left with three per mound.

Early Protection

Cover newly sown seeds and young plants with a fabric row cover after planting, securing it to the ground on all sides. This helps hold in heat, protects tender plants from damaging wind, and keeps insects away from plants.

Melon plants bear separate male and female flowers. The first flowers you see will be male; the female flowers will begin opening shortly thereafter. A small swelling at the

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base of the flower indicates a female flower. As soon as the first female flower appears, take off the row cover so pollinating insects can reach the flowers.

Watering

Melons need a steady supply of water, especially up until the time they begin setting fruit. Keep soil consistently moist — soaker hoses and drip systems are ideal because they slowly deliver water to the soil, minimizing runoff and keeping leaves dry. Once harvest time nears, cutting back somewhat on watering helps intensify the melons' sweetness.

Troubleshooting

A host of insect pests are attracted to melons as much as we are. Aphids and squash bugs can appear in huge numbers, seemingly overnight. Striped and spotted cucumber beetles are also common pests and can transmit bacterial wilt disease, which can quickly kill entire vines. Covering plants immediately after planting will protect them from these pests when they're young and at their most vulnerable, but you'll still need to be vigilant once you remove the covers.

Examine plants carefully every day, including the bottoms of leaves and inside the flowers. Hand-pick and destroy any eggs, larvae, and adult insects you find. A severe infestation may require an insecticide spray, such as neem oil.

Powdery mildew is a common disease that causes the leaves to appear coated with a film of talcum powder. Although it generally doesn't kill the plant outright, a severe infestation can weaken it to the point that the plant can't supply the developing fruits with the energy they need to grow and mature. There are several organic sprays available to help keep the disease in check.

If tiny melons wither and fall off the vine, or if fruits are malformed, then incomplete pollination is likely the cause. This can happen when rainy weather limits bee activity, if pollinator populations have been harmed by pesticides, or if temperatures reach the 90s. While weather is out of your control, you can take steps to create a pollinator-friendly habitat in and around your garden. Avoid pesticide sprays if possible, and use any pesticides — even organic ones — with the utmost care, following instructions to the letter.

Harvesting

One of the best things about growing your own melons is that you can harvest them when fully ripe and at their peak of flavor. Melons don't ripen after they're picked. The melons you purchase at the supermarket may get softer, but they don't develop any more flavor or sweetness from the time they were harvested.

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Now the big question: When is a melon ripe and ready to pick? To become adept at detecting ripeness, close observation, lots of practice, and luck all come into play. Here are some general clues:

The blossom end (the end opposite the stem) has a bit of "give" when pressed.

If you have a keen sense of smell, you may be able to detect a hint of sweet aroma when a melon is ready to pick.

Cantaloupes: The rinds will change from greenish to tan, and the fruits will often detach (or "slip") from the vines.

Honeydew: Rind color changes from green to creamy yellow-white.

Watermelon: The tendril nearest the end of the melon will turn brown. If the melon is resting on the ground, lift it carefully; it's ready to pick if the area on the rind that was resting on the ground has turned from white to yellowish. Tap on the fruit; a hollow sound is also an indication of ripeness.

Fun Facts

- No wonder watermelon is refreshing on a hot summer day — it's about 92% water by weight!
- According to the Guinness World Records, the heaviest watermelon ever grown weighed 350.5 lbs.
- Watermelons are native to Africa. The first recorded watermelon harvest was 5,000 years ago in Egypt.
- One serving of cantaloupe contains 120% of your daily required value of Vitamin A and 80% of Vitamin C.

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