

Growing Guide: Mouse Melons

Resembling tiny watermelons, mouse melons are always a hit with kids, but most adults also find their cute shape and sweet name irresistible. The scientific name for mouse melon is *Melothria scabra*, but this adorable little fruit has a host of other common names, including cucamelon, and Mexican sour gherkin. In Spanish it is called *sandíta* (little watermelon) or *sandia de raton* (mouse melon).

Although they're a hot trend in gourmet restaurants, these little fruits have been a dietary staple in Mexico and Central America for hundreds of years. They're perfectly sized to pop in your mouth as you work in the garden, and they taste much like their relative, the cucumber, but with a hint of zesty lime in the skin.



Note: Mouse melons are tropical perennials. Ripe fruit that has fallen on the ground may reseed, and left to grow, the plants' vigorous vines can take over a garden or landscape. Prevent this by carefully collecting any fallen fruit throughout the season. The plants also form underground tubers; in warm regions these can overwinter and resprout, and can become a nuisance. If you prefer not to have the plants regrow, be sure to dig up the tubers, too.

How to Grow Mouse Melons

Selecting a site. Full sun is a must, as is well-drained soil. You'll need to provide a very sturdy support for the plants' vines, which can reach 10' or more in length. You can also grow the plants in containers, as long as the planter is heavy enough not to tip over from the weight of the vines and support. You can grow two or three plants in a five-gallon container.

Start seeds indoors. In regions with cool springs, start them indoors about a month before your average last frost date. Plant the seeds about 1/4" deep and keep the seedling trays in a warm spot, about 70 degrees F. (A heat mat is helpful.) The seeds should germinate in about a week, but can take as long as three weeks. The seedlings start out looking delicate — even scrawny — but the plants will soon take off. After your last frost date, start hardening off your seedlings by placing them in a sheltered spot and gradually exposing them to more sun and wind. Then plant them in the garden about a foot apart near the uprights to your trellis.

Direct sow seeds. In warm zones you can plant the seeds directly in the ground after all danger of frost is past and the soil is at least 70 degrees F. It's easiest to set up the trellis at planting time, so you can sow the seeds near the uprights.

In the garden. Be prepared to cover these heat-loving plants if a late cool spell threatens. You many need to gently guide the vines

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to the trellis by tying them loosely with twine until they start to climb on their own.

Water and fertilize. Treat your mouse melon plants similar to cucumber plants. If soil is poor or you didn't add a slow-release fertilizer at planting time, fertilize every two weeks with a soluble organic fertilizer. Unlike cucumbers, mouse melons don't seem bothered by any pests or diseases.

Pollination. Like cucumbers, mouse melons have separate male and female flowers. Hopefully, pollinator populations are robust in your garden, because hand-pollinating the multitudes of small flowers is tedious. If you're using row covers for frost or insect protection, remove them as soon as the plants start to flower.

Pruning. Depending on your trellising system, the vigorous vines may become a tangled mess, such that the inward vines receive inadequate sunlight. Pruning out some of the vines can help sunlight reach the remaining ones.

Harvest. It takes just a few weeks for a pollinated flower to produce a plump, ready-to-harvest, 1" long fruit. Then check plants every few days and harvest all fruit that's 1" to 1-1/2" long. Like cucumbers, beans, and many other garden crops, the plants will produce a bigger harvest if you continually harvest fruits as they ripen. Once they start producing, they'll continue until frost kills the vines.

Overwintering. Mouse melons are tropical perennials that form underground tubers. The tubers are hardy outdoors in zones 7 to 10. When the vines begin to die back, cut them off. When the ground freezes (if it does your zone) apply a layer of mulch over the roots. In colder zones, you can dig up the tubers, place them in a pot of slightly moist soil, and keep them in a cool spot (about 55 degrees). Replant in spring.

You can also collect seeds from ripe fruit for replanting the following year.

Fun facts

- Mouse melons are usually eaten fresh, but they can also be pickled or sliced into a stir-fry.
- Botanically speaking, mouse melons (cucamelons) are neither a cucumber nor a melon (nor are they part mouse). They are in the cucumber family, but are not closely related, and will not cross-pollinate with other members of the family.
- Growing the vines up and over an arch, arbor, or pergola makes it easy to harvest the fruits, which hang down like little decorations.
- Thirteen-year-old Emma Biggs, author of [*Gardening with Emma: Grow and Have Fun: A Kid-to-Kid Guide*](#), thinks mouse melons should top the list of foods to grow in every kid's garden.

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