

WATERMELON

Homegrown watermelons have a sweet taste and delightful texture. To produce a good crop, most varieties need a long, warm summer and plenty of soil nutrients. With proper planning, every gardener can savor a harvest of melons.

Varieties

Most watermelons grow well in the South, but northern gardeners should take special care when selecting a variety to ensure a good crop. If you live in the North, always use early varieties.

Planting

Provide loose, rich soil and a warm location. Before planting, work as much well-rotted manure and compost into the soil as you can. In the North, start seeds indoors four weeks before normal planting time, usually two to three weeks after the frost-free date. Use individual peat pots to avoid disturbing roots during transplanting. If you like, gamble by setting plants out early, protecting them with cloches during cold snaps. Or wait until the ground is warm and sow the seeds outdoors. Plant hills of watermelons 6 feet apart, six seeds per hill. Later, when the plants are up and growing, thin them to the three healthiest plants per hill.

Care

Use black or clear plastic in northern areas as a heat-giving mulch, watering the ground before laying the plastic. Do not use plastic in the South. Water the young vines frequently. Keep the bed free of weeds, taking care not to damage the vines. If not using plastic, lay an organic mulch. Because watermelons are heavy feeders, side-dress with fertilizer at regular intervals. Some gardeners set a can or jug of water with diluted fertilizer into or on top of each hill to drip nutrients to young plants. Watch for striped cucumber beetles, which carry disease. Kill them with carbaryl.

Harvest

Picking watermelons at just the right moment can be tricky since they won't ripen if picked too early. Note the day the female flowers blossom. (The female will have a little fruit on it.) On this day, bees pollinate the plant. Small varieties, such as 'Petite Sweet,' mature 28 days later. Larger ones, like 'Charleston Gray,' take 35 to 40 days. By knowing the day of flowering and the length of time your variety takes to mature, you can pick the fruit at just the right stage of ripeness. Catalogs, however, don't always supply this information so try some of these tricks: Check the round spot on the bottom of the fruit; it turns from white or cream-colored to yellow as the fruit ripens. Practice thumping the melon with your knuckles; the sound changes with advancing ripeness. Some growers squeeze the melon; if it cracks slightly, the melon is ripe. As the season draws to a close, encourage the ripening of the few remaining large fruits by picking all the immature fruits.