



Easy Gardening

MELONS • MELONS • MELONS • MELONS • MELON

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Melons most commonly grown in Texas include honeydew, muskmelon and watermelon. Muskmelons are often mistakenly called cantaloupes, but the true cantaloupe is a small, warty fruit and is not usually grown in the United States.

Varieties

Muskmelon	Watermelon	Seedless watermelon
Ambrosia	Allsweet	Tiffany
Caravelle	Black Diamond	Tri-X 313
Hale's Best	Charleston Gray	
Israeli	Crimson Sweet	
Magnum 45	Jubilee	
Mainstream	Mickylee	Honeydew
Mission	Mirage	Honey Girl
Perlita	Royal Jubilee	Sweet Delight
TAM Uvalde	Tendersweet	TAM Dew

Site Selection

Melons are vining crops that require a lot of space, especially watermelons. For this reason they are not well suited to small gardens and should be grown only in lot-size gardens in urban areas or larger gardens in

rural areas. Muskmelons can be grown in small gardens if the vines are trellised and the fruit is supported (Fig. 1).

Melons grow best on a deep, well-drained, sandy or sandy loam soil with plenty of organic matter. Heavy soils with a lot of clay often cause small, weak plants that produce fewer melons. Melons prefer soils with a neutral pH, and if the soil is too acidic the plants will drop their blossoms.



Figure 1. One method of support for melons grown on a trellis.

Soil Preparation

Dig or plow the soil 8 to 10 inches deep in winter or early spring. If organic matter or manure is added, it should be well composted. Apply manure or compost at 50 to 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet, or about 2 to

4 tons per acre, to build the organic matter content of the soil. Turn the soil over so all organic matter is covered completely.

Since melons require well-drained soils, work the soil into ridges or hills 4 to 8 inches high and 12 to 14 inches wide for planting. Heavier soils require higher ridges.

Place the rows of muskmelons and honeydews 6 to 8 feet apart, rows of irrigated watermelons 10 to 12 feet apart, and rows of un-irrigated watermelons 12 to 16 feet apart.

Planting

Melons are warm-season crops and are easily injured by frost. Do not plant seeds until the soil warms in the spring and all danger of frost is past. Black plastic mulch can increase the soil temperature, giving melons an earlier start on growth.

Plant the seeds in hills. Plant groups of six to eight seeds at a depth of 1 to 1½ inches. Fine sandy soils or heavy clay soils often crust when dry, so if the weather is dry

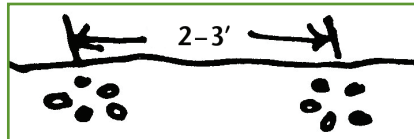


Figure 2. Proper spacing of hills is important.

after planting, the hill may need moistening to soften the soil. Planting several seeds per spot helps plants push through. Place the hills 2 to 3 feet apart for muskmelon and honeydew and 4 to 5 feet apart for watermelon (Fig. 2).

Gardens can be harvested 10 to 12 days earlier if you use transplants. Plant seeds in peat pots 2 to 4 weeks before transplanting. Transplant them into the garden before the second true leaf opens (Fig. 3).

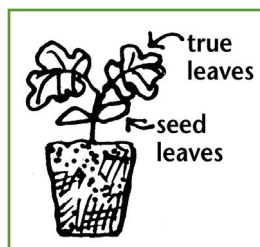


Figure 3. Plant transplants before the second true leaf opens.

Fertilizing

Melons do best with small amounts of fertilizer in two or three applications. Apply fertilizer in a band along the row for best results (Fig. 4).

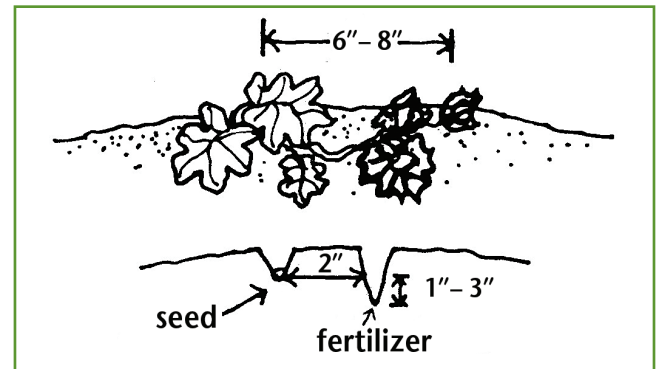


Figure 4. Apply fertilizer in a band along the row.

For watermelons, apply a fertilizer high in phosphorous, such as 10-10-10, at a rate of 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet (60 to 90 feet of row). Make a trench on the planting bed 4 to 6 inches deep and 2 inches from the side of the row. Cover the fertilizer and plant so seeds do not touch the fertilizer. Before the runners on the vines are about 6 inches long, scatter 2 to 3 pounds of fertilizer per 60 to 90 feet of row 2 to 3 feet to the side of the row and mix it lightly with the soil.

Fertilize muskmelons and honeydews with 2 to 3 pounds of fertilizer for every 60 to 70 feet of row. Phosphorous, the second number on the fertilizer label, is most important for muskmelons at planting, and nitrogen is important when the vines begin to run. Make the second fertilizer application to the side of the row when vines begin to run.

After Planting

Melon plants break through the soil 10 to 12 days after planting. After the plants are up, thin them to three to four plants per hill. After the plants have two or three

leaves, thin them again, leaving two plants per hill. Insect or other damage often makes another thinning unnecessary.

Keep weeds away from the plants, especially at the beginning of the season while the plants are getting started. When hoeing, be careful not to cut too deeply into the soil near the melon plants, or the roots will be damaged.

Melon plants have separate male and female flowers on each plant, and bees must be present to cross-pollinate the flowers. Poor pollination causes female flowers to fall off the vines or fruits to be poorly shaped, which is a common problem with watermelon (Fig. 5).






Figure 5. Melons need bees to cross-pollinate the flowers.

Fruit size can be increased by pruning watermelons to two fruits per plant for large varieties or four to six fruits per plant on small varieties. Pruning also increases the size of muskmelon fruits, but usually it is not needed.

Before using a pesticide, read the label. Always follow cautions, warnings and directions.

Insects

Name and description	Control
 <p>Spider mites: barely visible to naked eye; spiderlike; suck juice from undersides of leaves; may form tiny webs; leaves lose color</p>	<p>beneficial insects strong blasts of water insecticidal soaps neem oil</p>
 <p>Cucumber beetle: Adult 1/5 inch long; yellow to black with black spots or three stripes on back; feeds on stems, leaves and fruit; transmits bacterial wilt; larvae bore into root and stem below soil line</p>	<p>Sevin® pyrethrins</p>
 <p>Aphids: 1/2 inch long; soft bodied; green, pink, red or brown; usually on undersides of leaves; suck plant juices</p>	<p>neem oil insecticidal soaps</p>

Diseases

Rotating crops is very important in disease control. To prevent the buildup of diseases, do not plant melons in the same place more than once every 3 or 4 years. If spots do appear on the leaves and no insects are present, a fungicide may be needed. Ask your county Extension agent about what to use.

Harvesting

Judging the ripeness of watermelons requires skill and experience. Some signs of ripeness in watermelons are:

- *Dull sound when thumped.* This varies with the gardener and the size and type of melon and often is inaccurate.
- *Change in color of rind.* Ripe melons often lose their glossy color.
- *Change in color of soil spot.* The spot where the melon rests on the soil takes on a creamy, streaked color.
- *Death or drying of the tendril.* The tendril near the point where the melon is attached to the vine dries when ripe. This is the most dependable sign (Fig. 6).

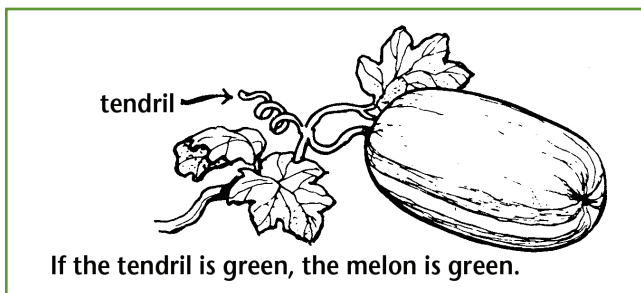


Figure 6. A melon is ripe when the tendril nearest the vine is dry.

Use a knife to cut watermelons from the vine.

Harvest muskmelons when the fruit rind changes to a yellowish-orange color, the stem begins to separate or slip from the fruit, and the odor gets strong. If left long enough, the stem will naturally separate from the fruit. This is called “full slip.” Fruit at this stage should be used within 36 to 48 hours as it will spoil soon. For better quality, harvest fruits at the “half slip” stage when the stem is



Figure 7. Harvest muskmelons when the stem begins to separate from the fruit.

partially separated from the fruit (Fig. 7).

Harvest honeydew melons when the skin begins to turn yellow and the end of the fruit opposite the stem (blossom end) begins to soften.

Do not harvest melons too early because the sugar content does not increase after harvest. Muskmelon can improve in flavor after harvest, but this is caused by mellowing of the flesh.

Most melons require 80 to 100 days from planting to harvest.

Serving

Melons can be served many ways, but they are usually sliced and served fresh. They can also be used in fruit salads or salsas, in melon sorbet, or even in a watermelon margarita. No matter how you cut it, melons are a traditional summer treat in Texas.

Acknowledgment

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