

Watermelon

Citrullus lanatus

Watermelons can be grown in all parts of the country, but are most suited to regions with long growing seasons. Northern gardeners should look for fast-maturing varieties, and take measures such as starting seedlings indoors and warming the soil with plastic mulch to get a jump on the growing season. The rewards are worth the extra effort!

TIP – Plastic mulch is the farmer’s preferred method of watermelon weed control. A study at Kentucky State University showed that newspaper covered by hay or straw produced good yields also.

Location and soil Plant watermelons in full sun in the warmest spot in your garden. If you have limited space choose a “bush” type. Alternately, grow a small-fruited variety and construct a sturdy trellis. Watermelons produce best in loose, fertile, well-drained soil.

When to Plant Sow seeds directly into the garden when the weather warms; soil should be 70°F or warmer. If a short season or cool nights makes melon growing iffy, start seeds indoors about 3 weeks before you plan to set them out.

Seed depth and Spacing Sow 4-5 seeds 2 to 3 inches apart and 1 inch deep in hills spaced 6-8 feet apart.

Germination Seed should germinate in less than a week in warm soil. Provide bottom heat if starting indoors.

Thinning Thin seedlings when they have 2-3 true leaves, leaving 2 or 3 plants per hill. Choose the strongest plant when they are 3 inches tall.

Care Water deeply at planting time and whenever the “finger test” shows that the soil is dry 3-4 inches below the surface. Stop watering 2 weeks before you expect to harvest.

Pests If cucumber beetles are a problem protect young vines with row covers, removing them when flowers appear, or start seedlings indoors. Do not plant melons in the same location year to year; rotate them with other plant families.

Fertilize Add a generous amount of compost to the soil prior to planting, and side-dress with compost or a balanced fertilizer when the first flowers appear.

Harvest There are several indicators for ripeness, none of which is failsafe. By checking all of the following, you won’t go wrong.

1. Tendrils at the stem end turn dry and brown.
2. Fruit surface color becomes dull.
3. Outer skin resists penetration by a thumbnail.
4. Underside of fruit turns a lighter color.

Nutrition Watermelon is an excellent source of vitamins A and C, and contains high levels of lycopene, a powerful antioxidant linked to heart health and lower incidence of some types of cancer.

	Baby Doll hybrid	Cal Sweet	Sugar Baby	Sugar Baby Bush
				
Description	Icebox melon with green striped skin and sweet yellow flesh.	Open pollinated melon with bright red flesh; known for its superior taste.	Open pollinated icebox type; dark green melons with juicy red flesh.	Open pollinated icebox type; dark green melons with juicy red flesh.
Fruit size	6-12 lbs	25-30 lbs	8-10 lbs	10-12 lbs
Comments	Short season variety	Wilt tolerant	Short season variety	Good for small spaces
Harvest	75 days	90 days	75 days	75-80 days