

How to grow melons

Cantaloupe (*Cucumis melo*)

Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*)

Family: Cucurbitaceae (Cucurbits)

Season: Warm

Ease of growing: Moderate

Fertility needs: Medium

Water needs: Medium-high

Common propagation: Seed

Seed facts

Germination temperatures: 65°F to 85°F

Germination time: 6 to 18 days

Viability: 3 years

Direct sow: late May to June

Transplants

Weeks to grow transplant: 3 to 4

Start: late April to May

Plant out: late May to June

Planning facts

Spacing: 18" to 24" in 6' rows

Plants per square foot: 0.5

Days to harvest: 85 to 100 from seed; 70 to 85 from transplants

Variety selection

Melons are a diverse group that includes three major categories: muskmelons, honeydew melons and watermelons. Muskmelons and cantaloupes generally have netted or ribbed skins and orange flesh. Honeydews are closely related to muskmelons but have smooth skin and green flesh. Watermelons are a different species originating from tropical Africa with greater heat requirements and a longer growing season than muskmelons and honeydews.

Preparation and planting

Melons require a lot of light to mature good quality fruit, so they are difficult to grow successfully in partly shaded gardens. Lighter textured soils high in organic matter are best for melons. In areas with short growing seasons, it is best to start melons, especially watermelon, in peat pots and transplant them into the garden. Plant seeds or transplants in hills or rows. If you set plants out early in soil warmed with plastic, be prepared to protect them with hot caps, plastic tents or other season extenders.

Care

Melons are deep-rooted but need consistent moisture, especially early in their growth and during flowering and early fruiting. Avoid overhead irrigation late in the day to minimize foliar diseases. The amount of water needed lessens as the fruit ripens. Use mulch to retain moisture, control weeds and, in the case of dark mulches, warm soil. All melons respond well to the heat provided by black plastic mulch.

Major pests

Insects: Mites and striped cucumber beetle.

Diseases: Bacterial wilt, Anthracnose, Phytophthora, gummy stem blight.

Harvesting and storage

The best way to tell if a watermelon is ripe is to look at the tendril across from where the fruit is attached to the vine. If the tendril is dry and brown, the fruit is mature. Muskmelons are ready when the fruit pulls easily from the vine. However, honeydews are over-ripe at that point. All melons, except netted ones, should not be stored below 45°F. With proper storage, many varieties can last for two to four weeks.

www.migarden.msu.edu

Developed by James Manning, Undergraduate Research Assistant, and Daniel Brainard, Vegetable Extension Specialist; MSU Department of Horticulture; Gary Heilig, MSU Extension educator.

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jeffrey W. Dwyer, Interim Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned.