

Growing Melons in Western Washington

Growing melons west of the Cascades can be a frustrating experience for home gardeners. Because the older cultivars of cantaloupes and watermelons require so much more warmth than is usual in western Washington to produce acceptable fruit, results are frequently disappointing.

However, plant breeders have been creating melon cultivars that are reportedly able to mature good crops of quality fruit in short-season areas of the world. Some of these short-season types have potential in our region.

Since 1985, Washington State University Master Gardeners have been conducting melon cultivar trials in demonstration and home gardens in several locales in the Puget Sound area. The following information on cultivars and culture is based on their experiences.

Melons need to be started in a greenhouse or indoors, approximately three to four weeks before they are scheduled to be planted in the garden. They should not be installed outdoors until the first or second week in June. Prior to that, outdoor air temperatures, especially at night, are likely to be too cold. However, the use of floating row covers or plastic tunnels may be able to mitigate such conditions if they are set out earlier. **See Fact Sheet #19 Row Covers for Vegetable Gardens.**

Because melons require a considerable amount of space in which to grow, they are not well adapted to small-space gardening. Plants should be spaced 2 to 3 feet apart in the rows with at least as much distance

between rows. The rows should be raised above the surrounding soil to help maximize heat in the root environment. Twelve inches is the minimum. Raised beds are also appropriate for melon culture. **See Fact Sheet #5 Raised Bed Gardening.**

Soils should be thoroughly worked up 4 to 6 weeks prior to planting in the garden and a layer of clear polyethylene installed over the rows to solarize the soil. When this is done, the temperature of the soil should increase 10 to 20 degrees over untreated areas by the time planting is accomplished.

Cantaloupes and watermelons should be attempted only where a full-sun site or something very close to it is available. A south or southwest facing location is most desirable.

As with any vegetable garden preparation, a complete fertilizer, such as 5-10-10, should be incorporated at the rate of 3 to 5 pounds per 100 feet of row. An application of lime to get the pH up somewhere near 6.5 is recommended.

Melon seeds should be started indoors in individual 4-to-6 inch peat pots around the first or second week in May. Plant 3 seeds to each pot, and when they have emerged, thin to the strongest seedling in each pot. Bottom heat is most desirable to ensure a quick start and an evenly warm temperature for the roots.

Avoid checking the plants. Any stress during this indoor period must be avoided. Because available light is not likely to be adequate indoors for strong healthy growth,

supplementary fluorescent lighting must be used. Cool-white tubes kept 4 to 6 inches from the tops of the plants should do the trick.

During this indoor stage of growth, the plants will also need fertilizing several times to keep them growing steadily. A complete soluble fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 20-20-20, is appropriate. Since the majority of prepared potting soils are deficient in nutrients, this procedure is most important.

Before the seedlings are planted out, remove the clear plastic, weed the rows where necessary, and lay black plastic or landscape cloth over the rows to help increase the ambient air temperatures around the plants and fruit through the growing season. This is especially beneficial at night.

Large enough holes should be cut in the plastic so the young melons can be planted pots and all. The planted peat pots ensure minimum root disturbance at this time, but it is essential that no part of the pots' rims be allowed to protrude above the soil surface.

Melons are fairly deep-rooted plants that require consistent moisture. Irrigation must be carried out so that the soil is adequately moistened to a depth of 3 feet or more. Furrow irrigation, soaker hoses, or drip or trickle irrigation is the most efficient way to accomplish this.

As with any warm-season crop grown in western Washington, melons will take much more time to ripen than the seed packets state. As an example, one cultivar reported to take 61 days, actually required 110 days from indoor seeding to harvest.

Cantaloupes or muskmelons that have performed well and consistently are 'Sweet

'n Early', 'Minnesota Midget', and 'Earligold'. Burpee's 'Sweet 'n Early' has proved to be the most reliable, prolific, and possibly the best tasting of the bunch.

In the watermelon category, 'Yellow Doll', a yellow-fleshed cultivar, has been reliable and produces fruit that is quite sweet and flavorful.

'Gaylia' is a melon that is a cross between honeydew and cantaloupe.

Before trying melons in western Washington, several points should be considered:

- 1) Choose only short -season types that are reported to mature in less than 75 days.
- 2) Start them indoors in peat pots under plenty of light.
- 3) Set them out no earlier than early-to-mid-June.
- 4) Use raised rows or beds.
- 5) Use plastic mulches to enhance heat, and finally,
- 6) Plant melons in full sun.