



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS RUSCH

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# Summer is melon time

**Question:** What can you tell me about growing melons in the Umpqua Valley?

**Answer:** Melons are native to the continent of Africa. Many wild forms of melons and watermelons can still be found there today.

Though it is not known when melons were first cultivated, it is believed that prehistoric people may have gathered and saved the seeds of the sweetest melons, and this practice led to cultivation. Seeds and wall paintings found in Egyptian tombs indicate that melons and watermelons were under cultivation in Egypt at least 4,000 years ago.

Columbus brought melons to the New World on his second voyage, and by 1494 melons were under cultivation in Haiti. By the 16th century, melons and watermelons were being cultivated throughout North and South America.

The melon family, Cucurbitaceae, is a plant family that also includes gourds, cucumbers, squashes, pumpkins and luffas!

Melons are classified in many ways, here are just a few:

The Reticulatus group, the netted melons, includes the muskmelons. The melons sold as “cantaloupes” in the United States are often the netted types of this group. Muskmelons and their close relatives, Persian melons, are the melons Americans know best. In America, muskmelons are frequently, but incorrectly, referred to as cantaloupes.

Muskmelons are distinctive for the netting that covers most of their rind, and they are usually ribbed. The melons come in many sizes and shapes including round, oval and cylindrical. The flesh is generally orange and quite sweet, but some varieties of muskmelon and specifically, the Persian melons, can have green or white flesh and are also quite sweet.

The Cantalupensis group, the true cantaloupes, is characterized by a rough, warty rind and sweet orange flesh. They are common in European markets and are named for Cantalupo, Italy, near Rome, where these melons were grown from southwestern



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Asian stock.

Surprisingly, in America we do not grow many cantaloupes. We incorrectly call muskmelons cantaloupes. Cantaloupes are quite common in Europe, especially France, where they have been cultivated since the 1400s. Cantaloupes are primarily round in shape with prominent ribs and almost no netting. Most cantaloupes have very sweet orange flesh.

The Inodorus group, the winter melons, are large, smooth-skinned, mildly flavored, with light green to white flesh. They include the Honeydew, Crenshaw, Casaba, and Persian melons.

Watermelons, Citrullus lanatus, are in a category all their own.

To grow delicious melons in your home garden, choose a warm site. Melons are adapted to hot, dry conditions. Melons prefer a well-drained, loamy soil amended with organic matter.

Start melon seeds indoors three to four weeks before you intend to put them out in the garden or buy starts from your local nursery. Transplant plants 24 inches apart. Keep plants well-watered during establishment and fruit expansion. Overwatering may lower fruit quality.

Drip irrigation is better for melons than overhead sprinkling. Unless a prolonged dry spell strikes, stop watering



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when the fruits begin to ripen. This will improve flavor and reduce the risk of the fruit splitting. Fertilize well for top quality and yield.

Keep weeds away from the plants and apply mulch once the plants are established.

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 watermelons.

Judging the ripeness of melons requires skill and experience. Muskmelons are at their peak for flavor when harvested at “full slip,” that is when the stem separates easily at the point of attachment. Handle fruits gently.

Other types of melons, like honeydew and crenshaw, are cut off the vine after they turn completely yellow. For watermelons, the best indicators are a yellowish color on the underside where the fruit touches the ground and

a dead tendril or curl near the point where the fruit is attached to the vine.

You may also thump the fruit, listening for the dull sound of ripe fruit, rather than a more metallic sound. All melons will rot if left on the vine too long.

Varieties that perform well in our area are: Ambrosia, Athena, Sugar Cube, Oregon Delicious and Lilly (a crenshaw type). Watermelon varieties to try are Sugar Baby, Mini Love and Harvest Moon.

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.

*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-236-3052 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*



Judging the ripeness of melons requires skill and experience. Ripeness is different for each type of melon.