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MELONS (*Cucumis melo*)

Most of the melon varieties found in the grocery store have been bred to withstand the rigors of shipping and handling, have a good shelf life, and are often picked before fully ripe. By growing your own melons, you will experience the full fragrance and sweetness of a well-grown, local melon.

While melons come in the familiar cantaloupe and honeydew, there are other types that can provide a new array of colors and flavors, and are often not found in grocery stores.

Ananas: Renowned for their sweet, aromatic, and slightly spicy flavor. Ripe when the skin is mostly yellow-orange with a little green mottling and melons slip from the vine.

Asian: Among the earliest of melons to mature, these small, long, oblong melons are popular in Korea and other Asian countries. Moderately sweet, crunchy, white flesh. Harvest when the fruits slip from the vine.

Butterscotch: These small, round melons have a truly superior, rich, aromatic flavor reminiscent of a charantais. Harvest at forced slip.

Charentais: A small French melon with or without netting. At their best, they are more succulent than a cantaloupe. To determine ripeness, examine the small, long-stemmed leaf attached to the vine at the same point as the fruit. When ripe, this leaf will pale and the fruit will have a slight yellow tinge. Cut from the vine.

Canary: Common in parts of Asian, including Japan and South Korea, canary melons produce attractive yellow fruits with a distinctively sweet flavor and juicy white flesh. Harvest at forced slip.

Crenshaw: The oblong fruits are a pale, creamy yellow. The flesh is orange, creamy, sweet, and very aromatic — among the very best of all melons. Harvest at full or forced slip.

Galia: A tropical type that originated in Israel. Their complex flavor is suggestive of tropical fruit with a fresh, banana-like aroma. The rind has a corky net like cantaloupe, but no ribbing. Harvest at full slip, when the skin of the fruit has turned yellow.

Piel de Sapo: These melons, with their yellow and green mottled skin, are most commonly grown in Spain. They tend to be very sweet and aromatic. Harvest at full slip, or cut from the vine.

SITE SELECTION: Melons grow best in a light, well-drained soil with a pH of 7.0. A southern exposure is ideal, as melons like consistently warm temperatures. To help achieve this, the use of plastic mulch and row covers is recommended. In cooler areas, solar mulch is recommended because it warms the soil better than black mulch. In the South, most growers grow melons only in the spring to avoid the high heat of midsummer, though some will also grow a fall-maturing crop.

Good soil moisture is important in the early stages of growth and during pollination when fruits are setting. After this point, do not water unless the soil is very dry and the leaves begin to wilt; overwatering at this stage will cause bland, watery fruits. Drip irrigation is recommended to prevent excess water on the foliage, which can lead to disease.

TRANSPLANTING: Sow indoors in 50-cell plug trays or 2–3" peat pots in late April or one month (no sooner) before transplanting outdoors. Plant 3 seeds per cell or pot, about ¼" deep, maintaining a temperature of 80–90°F/27–32°C until germination. Handle the seedlings carefully and never let the soil dry out. Grow the seedlings at 75°F/24°C.

Reduce water and temperature for a week to harden seedlings prior to transplanting. When the weather is frost-free, warm, and settled, transplant 18" apart, in rows 6' apart. Even hardened melon seedlings are tender. Do not disturb the roots when transplanting and water thoroughly. After transplanting, water the seedlings with a fertilizer solution.

DIRECT SEEDING: Sow 1–2 weeks after the last frost when the soil is warm, above 70°F/21°C. Plant 3 seeds every 18", ½" deep, thinning to 1 plant per spot.

It is recommended to start melons indoors and transplant them outside, as direct seeding can result in germination and pest issues.

ROW COVERS: Since melons like consistently warm conditions, plastic mulch and row covers will make for earlier crops and better yields, especially in the North. In addition to the added warmth, row covers also exclude insect pests. Most growers cover newly transplanted crops with row cover immediately after transplanting. Hoops are not needed to support the row cover.

Remove the row covers once the plants have female flowers to allow for pollination. A female flower can be identified by the tiny fruit developing at the base of the blossom.

INSECT PESTS: Cucumber beetles are the primary pest of melons and can severely damage the foliage and also spread bacterial leaf wilt, *Erwinia tracheiphila*. Protect against cucumber beetles with floating row covers applied at transplanting, or control with pyrethrin or azadirachtin.

DISEASE: Choose varieties with resistances to the disease pressures in your area. Sudden wilt is a complex disease and cold weather stress syndrome in late summer when the plants have a heavy set of ripening melons, can cause plants to wilt almost overnight. Keep plants healthy with good fertility and irrigation to avoid sudden wilt. Practicing crop rotation will prevent the build-up of soil-borne pathogens in your soil.

HARVEST: The timing of when to harvest a melon is specific to the variety.

- Most varieties are ready at full slip: when a light tug or a gentle push of the thumb separates the fruit from the vine.
- Other varieties are harvested at forced slip: when more pressure is required to detach the fruit.
- Some varieties will be overripe by the time they are able to be tugged from the vine; these must be cut.

Other indicators of ripeness for harvest include when the gray-green color begins to change to buff-yellow and the fruit softens a little. Charentais and honeydew melons have a small, long-stemmed leaf attached to the vine at the same point as the fruit; this leaf will yellow when the fruit is ripe.

STORAGE: Netted melons store best at 36–41°F/2–5°C and 85–95% humidity. Store the other melon types at 45–50°F/7–10°C and 85–95% humidity. All will hold for a few days without refrigeration, but will hold longer if chilled. The particular variety and the ripeness of the fruit when harvested will dictate the duration of storage.