



MELONS (*Cucumis melo*)

Most of the melon varieties commonly found in the supermarket have been bred to withstand the rigors of shipping and handling: these varieties have harder flesh to resist bumps and bruises through the packing line and in transit, reduced sweetness and aromatics in favor of an extended shelf life, and are often picked before they are fully ripe. By growing your own melons, you will experience the full fragrance and sweetness of a well-grown, local melon.

While types like cantaloupe and honeydew are familiar favorites, there are other types of melons that can provide a new array of colors and flavors and are often not found in grocery stores. To learn more about the different kinds of melons, visit Johnnyseeds.com/melon-basics

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. Once fruit begin to ripen, take care not to overwater; 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 1–2 seeds per cell or pot, about ¼" deep, maintaining a temperature of 80–90°F/27–32°C until germination. Thin to one seed per cell. 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 2–3 seeds every 18", ½" deep, thinning to 1 plant per spot.

We recommend starting 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.

To allow for pollination, remove the row covers once the plants have female flowers. 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. They can severely damage the foliage and spread bacterial leaf wilt, *Erwinia tracheiphila*. Protect against cucumber beetles with floating row covers applied at transplanting, or control with pyrethrin or azadarachtin.

DISEASE: Choose varieties with resistances to the disease pressures in your area. Sudden wilt syndrome results from the simultaneous onset of environmental stress, such as overly hot or cold weather, in combination with one or more of several different soil-borne diseases hitting the plants at once. This typically can occur in late summer, when the plants already have a heavy set of ripening melons. It 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. While similar in symptoms, sudden wilt is different from bacterial leaf wilt, which is spread through cucumber beetle feeding and mainly controlled via insect control methods.

HARVEST: Visible or palpable changes at ripeness can involve the following: change in skin cast or coloration, cracking, striations, or other markings on the rind, and/or slight softening of the fruit. The browning and shriveling of the tendril and/or leaf most proximal to fruit stem, and the shrinking and cracking of the area where the stem attaches to the fruit are also good indicators. When these things begin to occur, it's time to test for ripeness.

At ripeness, some melons "slip" from the vine easily or with a bit of a tug, whereas others must be cut. there are three general categories:

- Full-Slip: Ripe fruit can be easily detached from the stem with a slight tug or a gentle push of the thumb against the peduncle.
- Forced-Slip: Also known as Half-Slip. Ripe fruit requires an extra-firm push of the thumb against the stem to detach it from the fruit—more pressure is needed than with full-slip types, but the fruit can still be harvested without cutting the stems.
- Non-Slip: Also called cut-from-the-vine types. Ripe fruits need to be cut at peak ripeness from the vine at harvest. These types would be very overripe if left until they slipped from the vine, if they ever slipped at all.

When the intention is to ship or store a melon crop, some growers elect to time the harvest to occur before peak ripeness—harvesting full-slip types early at the forced-slip stage, or harvesting forced-slip types early by cutting them from the vine. Take note that these practices will compromise the flavor.

The timing of when to harvest a melon is specific to the variety. Please refer to the variety-specific information in our product descriptions to determine what harvest-types your chosen varieties are.

STORAGE: Netted melons store best at 36–41°F/2–5°C and 90–95% 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.

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