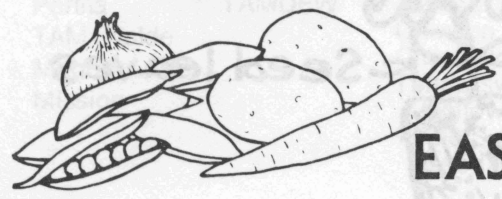


Texas Agricultural Extension Service



EASY GARDENING...MELONS

Sam Cotner*

Melons most commonly grown in Texas include watermelons and muskmelons. Honeydew melons also are grown by some gardeners. Often muskmelons are mistakenly called cantaloupes. The true cantaloupe has a small warty fruit and is not normally grown in the United States. Melons are vining crops that require a lot of space, especially watermelons. For this reason they are not well suited to small gardens, and their growth should be limited to lot-size gardens in urban areas or larger gardens in rural areas.

Soil Preparation

Melons grow best in a deep, well-drained sandy or sandy loam soil with plenty of organic matter. Heavy soils with a lot of clay often cause small, weak plants that produce fewer melons.

Dig or plow the soil 8 to 10 inches deep in winter or early spring. If organic matter or manure is used, it should be well rotted. Apply manure or compost at 50 to 100 pounds per 1,000 square feet or about 2 to 4 tons per acre to build the organic matter content of the soil. Turn the soil over so all plant material is covered completely.

Since melons require well-drained soils, work the soil into ridges or hills 4 to 8 inches high and 12 to 14 inches wide for planting. Heavier soils require higher ridges. Place rows of muskmelons and honeydews 6 to 8 feet apart, rows of irrigated watermelons 10 to 12 feet apart and unirrigated watermelons 12 to 16 feet apart.

Fertilizing

Melons do best with small amounts of fertilizer in two or three applications. Apply fertilizer in a band along the row for best results.

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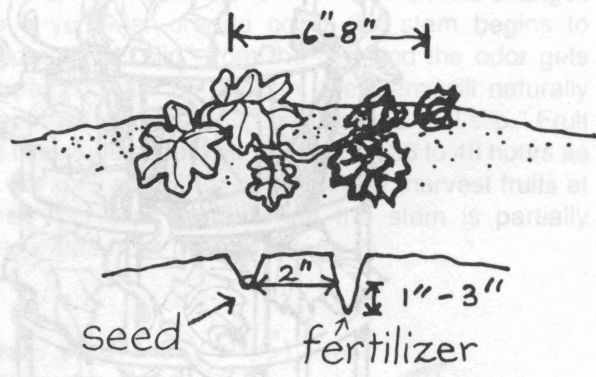


Figure 1

For watermelons, apply a fertilizer high in phosphorous such as 10-20-10 at the rate of 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet (60 to 90 feet of row). Make a trench on the planting bed 4 to 6 inches deep and 2 inches to the side of the row. Cover the fertilizer and plant so seeds do not touch the fertilizer (figure 1). Before the runners on the vines are about 6 inches long, scatter 2 to 3 pounds of fertilizer for each 60 to 90 feet of row 2 to 3 feet to the side of the row and mix it lightly with the soil.

Fertilize muskmelons and honeydews with 2 to 3 pounds of fertilizer for each 60 to 70 feet of row. Phosphorous, the second number on the fertilizer label, is most important for muskmelons at planting. Make the second fertilizer application to the side of the row when vines begin to run (figure 1). Nitrogen is the most important at this time.

Planting

Plant melon seeds in hills or groups of six to eight seeds at a depth of 1 to 1½ inches. Fine sandy soils or heavy clay soils often crust when dry. If the weather is dry after planting, the hill may need moistening to soften the soil (figure 2). Planting several seeds per spot helps plants push through.

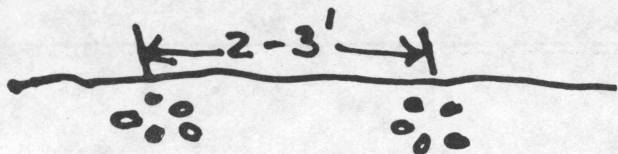


Figure 2

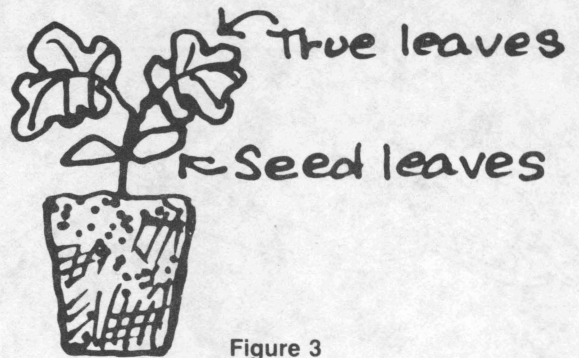


Figure 3

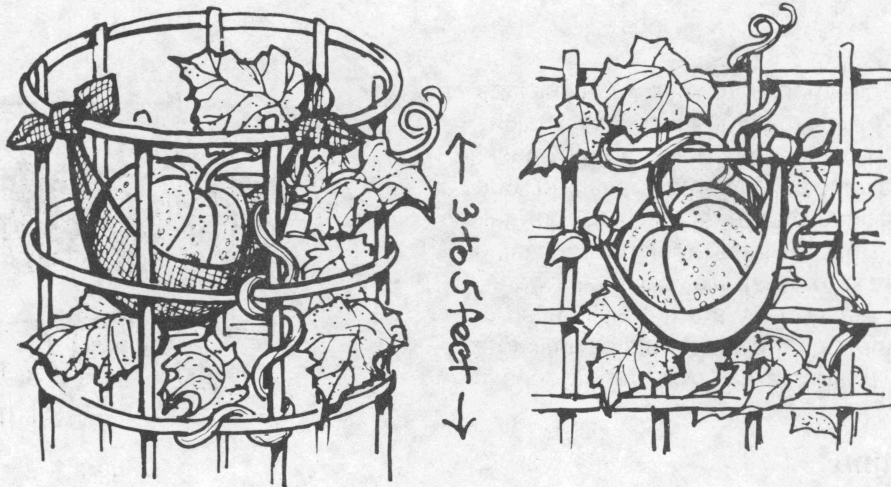


Figure 4

Place hills 2 to 3 feet apart for muskmelon and honeydew and 4 to 5 feet apart for watermelons (figure 2).

Melons are warm season crops and are injured easily by frost. Do not plant seeds until the soil warms in the spring and all danger of frost is past. Black plastic mulch warms the soil earlier in the spring. Gardeners can harvest 10 to 12 days earlier by planting seeds in peat pots or pellets 2 to 4 weeks before transplanting. Transplant to the garden before the second true leaf is open (figure 3).

Muskmelons grow in small gardens if vines are trellised and fruit is supported (figure 4).

After Planting

Melon plants break through the soil 10 to 12 days after planting. After the plants are up, thin to three to four plants per hill. When the plants have two to three leaves, thin to two plants per hill. Insect or other damage often makes the second thinning unnecessary.

Keep the plants weed free, especially in early season while the plants are getting started. Do not

cut too deeply into the soil near the melon plants or the roots will be damaged.

Melon plants have separate male and female flowers on each plant. 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. This is a common problem with watermelons (figure 5).

Fruit size can be increased by pruning watermelons to two fruits per plant for large varieties or four to six fruits per plant on small varieties. Pruning also increases the size of muskmelon fruits, but usually it is not needed.

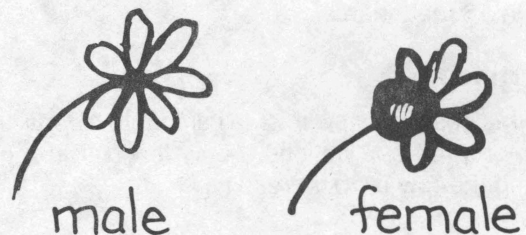


Figure 5

Varieties

<u>Muskmelon</u>	<u>Honeydew</u>	<u>Watermelon</u>
Perlita	TAMDEW	Jubilee
TAM Uvalde		Crimson Sweet
Magnum 45		Charleston Gray
Mission		Tendersweet (yellow)
		Triple Sweet (seedless)

Insects



<u>Name and description</u>	<u>Control</u>
Cucumber beetle: Adult 1/5 inch long; yellow to black with black spots or three stripes on back; feeds on stems, leaves and fruit; transmits bacterial wilt; larvae bore in root and stem below soil line.	Sevin



Aphids: 1/8 inch long; soft bodied; green, pink, red or brown; usually on underside of leaves; suck plant juices.	Diazinon
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Diseases

Rotating crops is very important in disease control. Do not plant melons in the same place more than once each 3 or 4 years. If spots appear on the leaves and no insects are present, a fungicide may be needed. Ask your county Extension agent about what to use.

Harvesting

Accurate selection of ripe watermelons requires skill and experience. Some signs of ripeness in watermelons are:

- *Dull sound when thumped.* This varies with the gardener, size and type of melon and often is inaccurate.
- *Change in color of rind.* Ripe melons often lose their glossy color.
- *Change in color of soil spot.* The spot where the melon rests on the soil takes on a creamy, streaked color.
- *Death or drying of the tendril.* The tendril near the point where the melon is attached to the vine dries when ripe. This is the most dependable sign (figure 6).

Use a knife to cut watermelons from the vine.



Figure 6

Harvest muskmelons when the fruit rind changes to a yellowish-orange color, the stem begins to separate or "slip" from the fruit and the odor gets strong. If left long enough, the stem will naturally separate from the fruit. This is called "full slip." Fruit at this stage should be used within 36 to 48 hours as it will spoil soon. For better quality, harvest fruits at the "half slip" stage when the stem is partially separated from the fruit (figure 7).

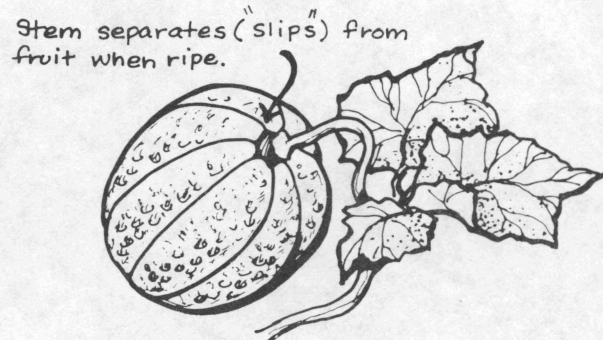


Figure 7

Harvest honeydew melons when the skin begins to turn yellow and the end of the fruit opposite the stem (blossom end) begins to soften.

Do not harvest melons too early. Sugar content does not increase after harvest. Muskmelon can improve in flavor after harvest, but this is due to mellowing of the flesh.

Most melons require 80 to 100 days from planting to harvest.

Serving

Melons are served raw, either alone or as part of a fruit salad. Melons are a traditional summer treat in Texas.



Figure 6

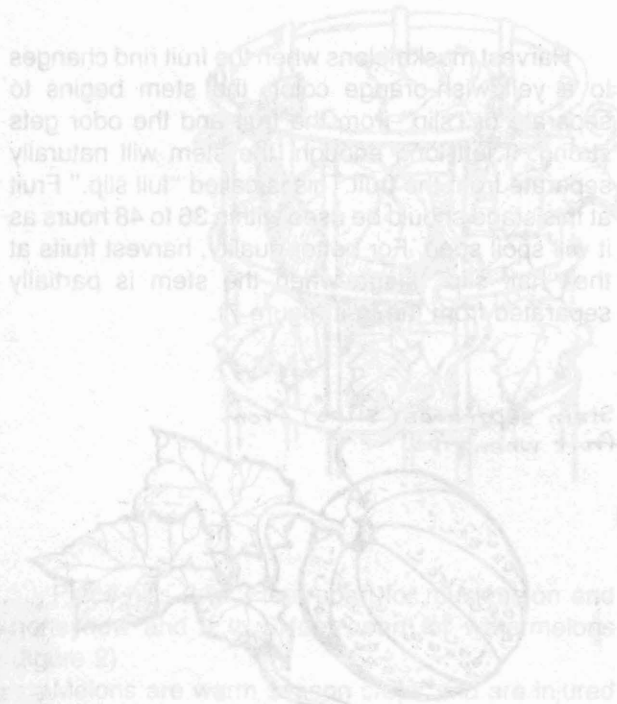


Figure 7



Figure 8

Varities
 Mission
 TAM Uvalde
 Felita

Insects



Diseases

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Bees plant these to cross pollinate. For pollination, the flowers will be full of female bees.

Acknowledgment
 The author acknowledges Garland McIlveen, Extension entomologist, for providing information on insect biology and control.

- Change in color of ripe melons often lose their glossy color.
- Change in color of soil spot, from white to the right on the soil surface a creamy, chalky color.
- Death of the plant. The tendrils near the point where the melon is attached to the plant will be the first to die.

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