

## Watermelons

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*They are some of the biggest, juiciest and most refreshing fruit available, but not all watermelons look like overgrown zeppelins! Delve into the wonderful world of heirloom watermelons and a mouth-watering array of varieties awaits you.*

### **FACT FILE**

**Botanical Name:** *Citrullis vulgaris*

**Family:** *Cucurbitaceae*

**Origin:** *Central Africa*

**Climatic Range:** *Watermelons prefer warm temperatures and a long growing season but fast maturing varieties can be grown in cooler climates if seedlings are established in green houses and planted out when the weather becomes warm.*

**Planting Time:** *Spring through until summer*

**Harvest Period:** *Most varieties are harvested 3-4 months after planting. Commercial crops grown in different areas throughout Australia ensure that fruit is available almost year round with peak harvest and availability occurring in summer.*

Watermelons grow in a similar manner to pumpkins on vigorous, annual vines. While the fruit is most prized, all parts of the plant including the seeds, rind, young leaves and tendrils are edible and used in traditional African cuisine.

Fruits vary in weight from less than 4 to over 18 kilograms depending on the variety. The flesh may be red, pink, orange, yellow, apricot or white depending on the variety selected. Skin colour is also extremely variable with heirloom varieties displaying a wide array of colours and patterns.

### **Preparing the Soil**

Watermelons are tolerant of a range of soil types, but demand excellent drainage or vines are likely to suffer root rot. Prepare the soil prior for planting by growing a green manure crop and digging it in or adding plenty of well decomposed manure from grazing animals or home made compost. Avoid applying poultry manure or rich organic fertilisers as this can cause root burning and/or over production of non-fruit bearing male flowers.

A pH of 6.5-7 is preferred. If necessary, lime may be added to the soil to increase the soil pH and supply calcium. If your soil is neutral to alkaline, gypsum can be added to the soil to supply calcium without altering the soil pH. Adequate supplies of calcium and regular watering are required.

Rock dust may be applied to the soil during preparation to supply slow release trace elements. Creating planting mounds or building up beds above the level of surrounding soil can help to improve drainage.

### **Planting Out**

Avoid planting watermelons in beds that have previously growing tomatoes, potatoes or eggplants as any residual root knot nematodes associated with these crops will quickly attack your seedling watermelons.

Seed is best sown directly into the soil. This method provides access to the greatest range of heirloom varieties and avoids transplant shock associated with planting out seedlings. It is possible to plant seeds into containers to get your crop off to an early start, but take extra care when planting out so as not to disturb seedling roots. Allow an area of around 2sq metres per plant. Seeds germinate within 14 days providing the soil is warm.



Watering plants with liquid seaweed or compost tea will help improve disease resistance and supply additional trace elements during the growing season. Pinching out the tips of developing vines will help to encourage branching. Each plant can be expected to produce three to six fruit providing they are watered regularly and receive adequate nutrition.

### **Pollination and Seed Saving**

Just like other cucurbits, watermelons produce separate male and female flowers on the one vine. It is common for vines to initially only produce male flowers. When female flowers do form, they will always be far fewer in number than male blooms. Bees are the main pollinators of watermelons with flowers most receptive to fertilisation during the early morning.

In common with zucchinis and pumpkins, watermelon flowers that have not been pollinated develop small, infertile fruit. These develop soft rot at the flower end of the fruit or turn yellow and fall from the vine completely. Hand pollination is one way to ensure successful fruit formation.

### **Saving Seed of Your Heirloom Variety**

Watermelons are insect pollinated and different varieties will cross with one another. To ensure seed purity, beat the bees to the task and hand pollinate female flowers. Select an unopened female flower and gently separate the petals. Place a freshly picked, pollen laden male flower in contact with the central stigma of the female flower. Protect hand-pollinated blooms from accidental cross-pollination by bees and other insects by placing a rubber band around the end of the flower to prevent it from opening naturally.

Collect the seeds from ripe fruit and wash away any residual flesh. Dry the seeds out of direct sunlight and store in a cool, dark, dry environment ready for planting the following season.

### **Protection from Pests**

Caterpillars can occasionally feast on watermelon vines. Most are picked off by birds, or can be controlled using soap sprays, spinosad sprays or derris dust.

Aphids love to feed on new shoots. They may seem innocuous, these sucking insects carry virus diseases. There is no control for virus affected plants and virus diseases can be transferred to the next generation of plants via infected seed. The honeydew produced by aphids can also debilitate plants through production of sooty mould. Simple soap sprays or a light dusting of wood ash or lime will control aphid outbreaks.

Outbreaks of powdery mildew disease are likely to occur when the weather is cool and damp. Fortunately there are several organically registered controls including use of Eco-rose and Vegetable spray based on potassium bicarbonate.

Cracks in fruit appear when plants are stressed by irregular water or the weather is too cold. As fruit approach maturing, you will need to protect fruit from potential predation from rats, mice, crows and possums.

### **Knowing When to Harvest**

How do you know when your much-awaited harvest is ready to pick? Just like harvesting pumpkins the traditional practice is to tap the fruit and listen for a hollow sound. Deterioration of the vines including shrivelling of the tendrils on the fruit stem is another sure sign that your fruit is ripe for the picking.

Watermelons have a variable shelf life according to variety. When harvesting the fruit, be sure to clip a short section of stem with the fruit rather than pull it from the vine. This will minimise damage. Handle watermelons carefully so as to avoid damage to the skin.



## **Eat Me Quick**

Watermelons are not a particularly long keeping fruit. Whole watermelons can be stored for up to two weeks in a cool, dark area out of the refrigerator. Storing whole watermelons in a cold refrigerator can cause the flesh to break down. Exposing harvested fruit to sun and heat will cause skin scalding and deterioration of the flesh. Once the watermelon is cut or to chill it for eating, it can be stored in the refrigerator, but should be eaten within a few days.

## **Heirloom Varieties – A Taste Worth Preserving**

### **Moon and Stars** (Diggers, Kings Seeds, Eden Seeds)

Description: Large oval fruit with dark green skin dotted with large yellow moons. Yellow specs that resemble tiny stars are also found on the fruit and the foliage. Flesh is sweet and pink/red in colour. Keeps longer than other varieties.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh up to a massive 18kg each with 3-4 fruit per plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 100 days.

### **Cream of Saskatchewan** (Diggers)

Description: A small round striped green and yellow rind with sweet cream/yellow flesh.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh 3-4kg each with 4-6 fruit per plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 80 days\*

### **Sweet Siberia** (Diggers, Eden Seeds)

Description: Medium-sized, mid green, elliptical melons with sweet, juicy apricot/orange flesh and small black seeds.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh 2-3kg each with 4-6 fruit per plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 80 days\*

### **Blacktail Mountain** (Diggers)

Description: An early maturing variety with dark green rind and sweet red flesh tolerant of a wide range of climates including cooler temperatures, drought and heat.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh 3-4kg each with 4-6 fruit per plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 70 days\*

### **Georgia Rattlesnake** (Kings Seeds)

Description: Deep green rattlesnake striping on pale green skin. Oblong fruit with light crimson flesh. Good keeping qualities.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh around 10kg each with 4 fruit produced on each plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 90 days.

### **Sugarbaby** (Green Harvest, Kings Seeds, Eden Seeds)

Description: Very sweet, early maturing small round fruit with dark green skin produced on compact vines. Ideal for home gardeners because of its smaller size.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh around 4 kg with 4-6 fruit produced on each plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 75 days\*

### **Crimson Sweet/Warpaint** (Green Harvest, Eden Seeds)

Description: Round light green fruit with dark stripes and sweet red flesh and small seeds. Good disease resistance and adaptable across a range of climates and soil conditions. Long keeping despite its thin skin.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh 10 kg or more with 3-4 fruit produced on each plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 85 days\*

### **Mountain Sweet Yellow** (Eden Seeds)

Description: Oblong, fruit with very sweet, dark yellow flesh and black seeds

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh between 9kg and 16kg with 3-4 fruit produced on each plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 90 days

**Kleckley's Sweet Watermelon** (also known as Monte Cristo)

Description: Dark green oblong fruit with thin skin and a sweet red juicy flesh peppered with large white seeds. Popular due to its disease resistance but has a short shelf life.

Size and Yield: Mature fruit weigh up to a massive 18kg with 3-4 fruit produced on each plant.

Minimum Period to Harvest: 85 days\*

*\*Faster maturing varieties are typically more suitable for cooler climates. They should be planted in early summer and harvested in late summer or early autumn.*