

Melons

Background

Melons are warm season crops that thrive in Oklahoma's long growing season. All kinds of melons grow in Oklahoma, but our watermelon crop is the most profitable. In 2015 Oklahoma produced 540,000 hundredweight of watermelon, adding about \$7 million to our state's economy.

Most of the watermelon produced in Oklahoma goes out of state. According to a study by the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Oklahoma exports 392.8 percent more watermelon than is consumed in the state.

In ancient times, watermelons were prized as a source of transportable water. Ancient Egyptian tombs are decorated with pictures of watermelon drawn more than 5,000 years ago. Traders sold seeds along ancient Mediterranean trade routes, and cultivation spread throughout Africa. By the 10th century, watermelon found its way to China, which is now the world's number one producer of watermelons.

Watermelon probably arrived in the US with colonists and African slaves. Some historians theorize watermelon may have American origins as well, since early French explorers found native farmers growing watermelon in the Mississippi Valley.

Thomas Jefferson grew watermelon at Monticello. He and his peers used every part of the watermelon. Besides eating the refreshing flesh of the watermelon, early Americans toasted the seeds for snacks, pickled the rind and drank the juice. The first cookbook printed in the US included a recipe for pickled watermelon rind. The United States now ranks fourth in worldwide production of watermelon.

Oklahomans began growing watermelon before statehood. At the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, Oklahoma exhibited three watermelons with a combined weight of 334 pounds. One, the largest of the exposition, weighed 117 pounds. In 2015 Oklahoma ranked 12th in the nation in the production of watermelon.

Acreage for watermelon has been the second largest for a vegetable crop, after southern pea, in Oklahoma for many years. Production is concentrated in the central and south-central areas, but watermelon can be grown in most areas of the state.

The rind of a watermelon looks tough but is actually quite fragile. For that reason watermelons are still picked by hand and passed hand-to-hand from the field to trucks, which take the melons to packing sheds. There they are sorted and hand-packed into trucks, crated into bins or placed in cartons for shipment to their destinations.

Although watermelons are sweet and usually eaten as dessert, they are classified in US Department of Agriculture statistics as a vegetable rather than fruit. They are members of the cucurbit family, along with squash, cucumbers and pumpkins. In 2006 the Oklahoma Legislature declared watermelon Oklahoma's state vegetable.

Watermelon is 92 percent water, fat free, nutritionally low in calories and high in energy. A two-cup serving of watermelon contains excellent levels of vitamins A, B6 and C. It is also a source of potassium.

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), watermelon is one of the traditional dishes enjoyed at most July 4th festivities—along with hamburgers, hot dogs, baked beans, corn on the cob, potato salad and potato chips.

How to Pick a Melon

Harvesting melons is labor-intensive. Conveyors and other harvesting aids can speed up the harvest process, but there are no mechanical harvesters that can decide which melons are ripe. That remains a human skill dependent upon experience and careful observation. To select your own ripe melons from the grocery or farmer's market, use the following hints:

- For most melons, the blossom end should be fragrant and give slightly to pressure.
- Muskmelons or cantaloupes should be tan or gold under their netting.
- Honeydews should be velvety and creamy yellow.
- Crenshaw melons should be golden yellow and green.
- Casabas are ready when the skin turns golden and the flesh white.
- Honeydews, casabas and watermelons should feel heavy for their size and sound hollow when tapped on the rind.
- Avoid melons with shriveled, punctured or cracked rinds.
- Watermelons should have a waxy look and a yellow patch on the belly.
- Thumping an unripe melon will produce a metallic sound while the sound emanating from a ripe melon will be duller.

Vocabulary

antioxidant—a substance that inhibits the destructive effects of oxidation, e.g., in the body or in foodstuffs or plastics

botanical—relating to the science of plants

cucurbit—any of various mostly climbing or trailing plants of the family Cucurbitaceae, which includes the squash, pumpkin, cucumber and melons

fiber—the coarse fibrous substances, largely composed of cellulose, that are found in grains, fruits, and vegetables, and aid digestion. This largely indigestible plant matter is considered to play a role in the prevention of many diseases of the digestive tract.

fragile—easily broken, damaged, or destroyed

fruit—the ripened ovary of a seed plant. The fruit is usually eaten as the dessert part of the meal

germinate—to begin to grow; sprout

horticulturalist—a scientist who studies and practices the art of growing fruits, vegetables, flowers, shrubs, and trees

hybrid—a plant produced from a cross between two plants with different genetic constituents. Hybrids from crosses between crop varieties are often stronger and produce better yields than the original stock.

irrigate—apply water to soil for the purpose of increasing plant production

melon—the round edible fruit of vines belonging to the gourd family, with a tough rind and sweet juicy flesh ranging in color from pale yellow to deep orange

nutrition—the science or study that deals with food and nourishment, especially in humans

ovoid—shaped like an egg

pectin—a gelling agent: a mixture of polysaccharides found in plant cell walls

pollinate—to convey or transfer pollen from an anther to a stigma of a plant or flower in the process of fertilization

potassium—a silver-white soft light low-melting monovalent metallic element of the alkali metal group that occurs abundantly in nature especially combined in minerals

rind—a tough outer covering such as bark, the skin of some fruits, or the coating on cheese or bacon

transplant—to transfer from one place to another; to uproot and replant a growing plant

vegetable—a plant cultivated for an edible part, such as the root of the beet, the leaf of spinach, or the flower buds of broccoli or cauliflower