



Harvest of the Month

Melons



Late summer is melon season in Sonoma County!

Enjoy the wide variety of flavors and textures these classic Summer fruits come in!

Botany

Common garden melons are classified as *Cucumis melo*. They are very closely related to other *Cucumis* species such as cucumbers, gherkins, and horned melons. They are also part of the *Cucurbitaceae* family which includes other common garden plants such as watermelons, squash, and pumpkin. *Cucumis melo* are further divided into two main groups: *Reticulatus* and *Inodorous*: *Reticulatus* varieties are characterized by their netted skin, with or without ribbing, and strong aroma while still on the vine. They also “slip” from the vine when ripe. This group includes all the cultivars of melons known as muskmelons, cantaloupes, Charentais, and Tuscan melons. *Inodorous* varieties are characterized by their smooth skin and lack of aroma until cut open. This includes all cultivars of honeydews, crenshaw, canary, and casaba. The Galia melon, a deliciously sweet green fleshed melon, does not belong to either group, but is a hybrid from two lesser known *C.melo* groups.

Melón means melon in Spanish.

Social Sciences

The origin of melons is not known. Research has revealed that melon seeds and rootstocks were among the goods traded along the caravan routes of the Ancient World. Some botanists consider melons native to Western Asia or areas along the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, while others place their origin in Iran, India, or Central Asia. Still others support an African origin. Over time, many cultivars developed with variety in shape and sweetness. Iran, India, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and China became centers for melon cultivation. Melons made their way to Europe during medieval times and then eventually to the Americas with early colonists. Today, China is the top producing melon country, followed by Turkey and Iran. In the U.S., California supplies three-fourths of the country’s crop.



Melon Salad with Honey, Lime and Mint Recipe

Nutrition

With their sweet juiciness, it's no surprise that melons are almost 90% water and about 9% carbohydrates, but they also contain over 20% of your daily recommended requirements for Vitamin C, and orange fleshed melons are a great source of Vitamin A!

Growing Tips

Melons are fairly easy to grow in warm climates. In more coastal regions, look for cultivars with shorter days to maturity. The plants will also benefit from dark mulch and row covers in cooler climates. Melon plants are not space efficient. If you don't have enough space for a sprawling plant, consider growing them up a fence or trellis, using smaller fruited cultivars, or getting creative with supports for larger fruits. Creating slings out of scraps of cloth is one way to do this: melon hammocks!

Planting & Care

Wait to plant melons in the Spring until the weather is warm and settled and the soil is at least 60 degrees F. You can transplant melon seedlings; however, like most Cucurbits, they do not like root disturbance so they must be transplanted before the plants have become rootbound in their containers. Plant the seedling deeply, up to the first true leaf for added support, and water thoroughly after planting. If your growing season is long and hot enough you can also direct sow melon seeds. They will germinate and grow rapidly in the warm soil of late Spring in inland Sonoma County.

To care for your melons, amend your soil with plenty of compost at planting time. Melons don't need excessive Nitrogen, as it encourages leaf growth. They do, however, need an adequate amount of Phosphorus and Potassium for fruit development, as well soil pH that is near neutral. Good soil moisture is also important in early stages of growth and during pollination when fruits are setting. After this point do not water the last week or more before fruits are ripe as overwatering causes bland fruit.

Harvest

Harvesting *Reticulatus* cultivars and crosses is as easy as waiting for the fruits to come off with a gentle tug, as they "slip" from the vine when they are ripe. Check them frequently once the rind has achieved its mature color; pick up the fruit gently and it will release from the vine when it's ripe. *Inodorous* cultivars are more tricky. Signs of ripeness include a change in skin coloration; checking for striations; slight softening of fruit starting at the blossom end; browning/shriveling of the tendril closest to the fruit stem; and shrinking/cracking at the stem attachment. The fruits will then need to be cut from the vine, leaving a small bit of stem attached.

The Crane Melon: a local celebrity

Crane melons were developed by the Crane family in Sonoma County around 1920. They are a unique hybrid that has characteristics of both the *Inodorous* and *Reticulatus* groups. They are still sold by the Crane family from their historic barn on Petaluma Hills Road outside of Santa Rosa each September! It wasn't until the 1990's that anyone outside of the Crane family was legally allowed to grow the melon. Today, seeds are available

from small seed growers who preserve unique cultivars.

