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Watermelon

National Garden Bureau has declared 2013 the year of the watermelon. What a great excuse to discuss such a juicy, sweet fruit. Watermelon's scientific name is *Citrullus lanatus* from the family Curcubitaceae. It is cousin to the cucumber, pumpkin and squash.

According to the National Watermelon Promotion Board Watermelon is thought to have originated in the Kalahari Desert of Africa. The first recorded watermelon harvest occurred nearly 5,000 years ago in Egypt and is depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphics on walls of their ancient buildings. Watermelons were often placed in the burial tombs of kings to nourish them in the afterlife.

The United States currently ranks fourth in worldwide production of watermelon. Forty-four states grow watermelons with Florida, Texas, California, Georgia and Arizona consistently leading the country in production. By weight, watermelon is the most-consumed melon in the U.S., followed by cantaloupe and honeydew.

In southeast Missouri watermelon can be planted as soon as the last frost has occurred. This may be as late as April 15. Many will start seeds inside in March so that they will have a healthy plant to transplant by mid-April.

There are 200-300 varieties grown in the U.S. and Mexico, although there are about 50 varieties that are very popular. There are seeded and seedless varieties that can be grown. Seedless watermelons must be cross pollinated with a seeded cultivar to produce a seedless fruit. For this reason plant at least one hill, in the center of the planting, with a seeded cultivar. Some common seeded varieties include Carnival, Crimson Sweet, Matador, Regency, Royal Jubilee and Royal Sweet. Some seedless varieties include Freedom, Millionaire, Yellow Baby, Summer Sweet and Genesis. Flowers of both varieties will need to be blooming at the same time in order for cross-pollination to take place. Seeds or transplants should be planted 8 foot apart in hills. Plant at least three hills at a depth of ½ inch. The first melon should be ready 85-95 days after planting seed.

The taste of watermelon is determined by the concentration of sugars, produced by photosynthesis in the leaves. It is extremely important to keep the vines healthy and well fertilized to ensure adequate photosynthesis occurs. Fertilize once plants begin to mature at .5 pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Do not fertilize after runners are formed as this will delay fruit development.

Cucumber beetles, spider mites and aphids are the most common pests of watermelon. Ideas that can be used to control these insect includes row covers, insecticides or planting companion plants that may repel insects. Plants that may help include nasturtiums, oregano or radishes. Sunflowers and corn are often planted with watermelon to provide stalks for vines to grow on.

A 2 cup serving of watermelon contains 30% Vitamin A, 25% Vitamin C, 2% Calcium and 4% Iron of a daily 2000 calorie diet. This same serving contains 672 mg of citrulline making it good for your heart. Watermelon is 92% water.

Many people will ask how to determine if a watermelon is ready to harvest. Books will say to watch for yellowing on the lower portion of the fruit or thump the melon and listen for a hollow, metallic sound. Commercial growers watch for the stem holding the watermelon to turn brown and die. Once this happens, the watermelon is ready for harvest.

According to [Guinness World Records](#), the world's heaviest watermelon was grown by Lloyd Bright of Arkadelphia, Arkansas in 2005, weighing in at 268.8 lbs (121.93 kg). Lloyd grew and weighed in for the Annual Hope, Arkansas Big Watermelon Contest on September 3, 2005.

The Extension office is open Monday - Friday, located in Kennett, Missouri at 233 North Main Street. For horticulture questions contact the horticulture specialist at 573-686-8064. MU is an equal opportunity/ADA institution.