



GARDEN NOTES

DON'T WIG OUT OVER EARWIGS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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PLANTING AND PICKING THE PERFECT MELON

Watermelons were designed for summer picnics -- they are cool, refreshing and come in their own carrying case.

There are a variety of melon sizes, shapes and colors, and they can be grown right in your own backyard, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Green River, located in the middle of the state, is renowned for the melons it produces.

Watermelons are not an easy food to grow, but well worth the extra effort, he says. One trick to raising watermelons successfully is getting them planted as early as possible. This normally means putting the transplants in the ground about the second week in May, after all danger of frost is past. If you are growing them from seed, start them indoors six to eight weeks before you want to plant them outside.

Watermelons need lots of room for their vines and for fruit production, Goodspeed explains. Space them between four and six feet apart, with a two to three foot row. Watermelons do best when they don't have to compete with weeds or other vegetables. Many growers plant them in plastic to improve the moisture retention and reduce the weeds. This also warms the soil and encourages early growth.

Like most plants, melons prefer a deep, organic rich soil, he says. In the fall, prepare to grow melons the next year by adding plenty of compost to the garden area. Also, if your soil is heavy, consider creating a raised bed. This promotes good drainage, helps the soil warm faster, and keeps the soil from being compacted during the growing season.

Side dress the row of melons with a good all-purpose fertilizer at the time of planting, he adds. Apply this fertilizer in a row about two inches deep and a good three inches away from the transplants. This gets the fertilizer close enough to the new, young plants so they can find it, yet far enough away so the roots won't be burned.

Be careful not to over-water melon plants, especially when they are young and growing,

Goodspeed says. They are susceptible to root rot and other water related problems. Water them deeply so they will develop a good, deep root system.

"One question I am often asked is how to tell when a melon is ripe and ready to be harvested," he says. "Most people tend to pick the fruit before it is ripe. To determine when a melon is close to harvest time, check the tendril on the stem where the melon is attached. As the melon ripens this tendril starts to dry up and die. Once the tendril has dried, look at the color on the bottom of the melon where it has been sitting on the ground, -- this is called the ground color. As the melon ripens and turns sweet, the ground color turns yellow and darkens. Eventually the outside rind loses its shine and appears to be a little dull.

"Another popular method for determining whether a melon is ripe is thumping it. I find it difficult to describe what a watermelon should sound like when it is thumped. People have told me it sounds a little like thumping on your head. Having thumped my own head, and hearing nothing but an echo, makes me leery of this method."

Some gardeners prefer to grow seedless watermelons, he says. When planting seedless melons, plant one pollinator plant for every three seedless plants. The pollinator plants cross with the others to produce seedless melons. The pollinator plants also produce melons, they just have seeds.

There are many different varieties available to grow in the garden, Goodspeed says. Small ice-box melons such as Yellow Baby, Tiger Baby, Sugar Bush, Sugar Baby and New Queen are just right for a small gathering of two to three people. Standard sized varieties including Crimson Sweet, Black Diamond, Jubilee and Golden Cross and are great for feeding the whole family.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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