



Garden Fruits: Sweet Heirloom Melons

Melons are the candy of garden fruits and vegetables. Many heirloom melons are especially tasty. Find out if growing a sweet heirloom melon variety is right for you.

By Barbara Berst Adams

About the Author

Barbara Berst Adams is the author of *Micro Eco-Farming: Prospering from Backyard to Small Acreage in Partnership with the Earth*, New World Publishing. www.microecofarming.com "Heirloom melons look different, that's for sure," said Brad Stufflebeam, owner, along with wife Jenny, of Home Sweet Farm in Texas.

Brad and Jenny grow heirloom and open-pollinated melons along with other fruits and vegetables on their sustainable small farm.

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Harvesting "The aromas and flavor cannot be matched with conventional commodity produce," he says. "Many melons could be a dessert."

Indeed, melons are the candy of garden fruits and vegetables. A vintage melon patch for unique family enjoyment or sought-after specialty market crops can be a small farm's "candyland."

© Jere Gettle. Courtesy Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co.

Tigger: This taste-test winner discovered in Armenia is so aromatic that cutting open one tigger perfumes an entire room. There are melons with flavor hints of mango, pineapple or peach. There are Israeli melons that change from green to gold and French melons with ambrosia-like scents. The Kiwano melon has flesh that resembles lime green Jell-O; And then there's Tigger, a taste-test winner first discovered in Armenia with a lemon-yellow rind splashed with red zigzag stripes. Its flesh is so aromatic that cutting open one Tigger perfumes an entire room.

Melon Memoirs

Thousands of years ago, African Bushmen relied on wild watermelons to provide living canteens of uncontaminated water. Wild relatives of our current watermelons and other familiar melons still grow in Africa, but the flavor and geographical range of melons have come a long way.

© Jere Gettle. Courtesy Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co.

Boule d'Or: A honeydew-type once a market melon in France is a winner in classy markets. It is believed that the seeds of the sweetest melons were saved and cultivated in Egypt at least 4,000 years ago. Around 3,000 years ago, seeds reached beyond Egyptian borders via trade routes, and most likely arrived in Europe when North African Moors brought melons to Spain during their occupation from 711 to 1492.

Melons and cucumbers were planted in Haiti when Columbus landed, and early European colonists and African slaves brought more melons, including watermelons, to North America.

It was not just the flesh of the watermelon that was valued; seeds also gave nourishment, especially to Africans and Chinese, over hundreds of years. Even today, Chinese medicine and Edgar Cayce, a promoter of holistic healing, recommend white watermelon seeds and a tea made from them as a remedy for mild ailments. Even the rind can be used as a healing food.



By the 1800s, a rainbow of melon varieties graced gardens and filled farmers' patches. But like many food crops, melons eventually underwent hybridization and commercialization in the 20th century.

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Submit They were bred for centralized agribusiness, for long distance shipability and for growing and harvesting conditions that suited larger commercial operations. When this happened, many of the vintage melons of yesteryear went by the wayside.

Conventional hybrid watermelons, as well as the netted melon Americans have come to call cantaloupe, and the honeydew became the norm in supermarkets, with a few novelties showing up here and there. But there are hundreds of worthy melon varieties available, and more being rediscovered or rebred.

Locally-grown heirloom melons make an especially inviting gourmet market crop, as they are rare in supermarkets. They need to be vine-ripened for maximum sugar content, which often takes careful hand harvesting at various times over the growing season. They do not sweeten much, if at all, after being picked. However, some can be stored for weeks or even months, when juiciness, texture and aroma may continue to improve.

Heirloom melons have also impressed Josh Kirschenbaum of Eugene, Ore., the product developer of seeds and green goods for seed companies including Abundant Life Seeds, which tests and distributes heirloom varieties.

"This past summer, we trialed over 75 different melons and over 80 percent of them were open-pollinated," he says. "There were quite a few impressive varieties with probably just as many reasons why they were impressive. One thing that stood out was that the varieties touted as being early maturing varieties did indeed ripen at the same time as their hybrid counterparts."

Those who trial seeds for specialty markets know that the varieties must be top quality to retain loyal customers. Vintage melons, with their great variety, are attracting customers quite well.

"Another trait I found impressive about several of the older, open-pollinated melons," Kirschenbaum continues, "was the unique shapes, sizes and colors. I think that for some folks, all they see are the standard melons found at the grocery store. For those that are looking for something unique, there really are great choices out there."

But what about practicality? Are they as "tough" as hybrids? Apparently many of them are. "Something else that I found impressive," Kirschenbaum said, "was that several of the older heirloom types were quite disease resistant."

An all-time favorite summer treat, certain melons can be pickled and preserved.

At Cedar Hill Farm in Rice, Minn., fresh honeydew slices are simmered in vinegar, allspice, orange peel, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, sugar and pectin to make a pickled melon, which are sold over the Internet. The varieties that naturally store well extend the delights of these fruits into the winter.

Sharing Melons and Selling Them to Others

When I grew my first specialty melon more than 15 years ago on my Island Meadow Farm market garden here in the Pacific Northwest (where local vine-ripened watermelons are rare), I sliced it in half and gave it to a very conservative friend. It was a small, yellow-fleshed watermelon.

"I kept it in the refrigerator for a week before I could touch it," said my friend. "It seemed so strange to see yellow watermelon. But once I ate it, it was so delicious."

Since then, most folks have opened up and come to expect wonderful things from the world of heirloom melons.

"We have been growing melons now for only five seasons or so," Brad Stufflebeam says. "We started, naturally, with an interest in old varieties; our first was the now-popular Moon and Stars watermelon."

Moon and Stars is a large, deliciously flavored heirloom watermelon with a dark-green rind speckled with bright yellow dots that resemble stars and often at least one larger yellow spot that resembles a moon. It has come to be better known by the public since it first reappeared in rare seed catalogs near the end of the 20th century.



Since its rediscovery and introduction to the general public, citizens of our country seem to want even more melon surprises.

"Most everything we grow is unusual, and educating the public is the core to everything we do," says Stufflebeam.

Jere Gettle travels the world seeking fine heirloom seeds and contacts many successful market growers. Jere is the discoverer of the Tigger melon and he now sells many vintage melon seeds to growers across the globe. He said that the key to drawing customers to newer crops is variety.

"Customers buy more and try more when they see the wide variety available," he says. Gettle also suggests offering recipes, serving ideas and free samples if you can. "Once people try many rare varieties, they want more!"

Another idea Gettle suggests is informing others of the heritage of the fruits.

"Give people the history of your varieties and show them that your varieties are part of our culture and not mass produced," he says. To go even further, history can come alive at a farmers' market or roadside stand.

"Make a historical-looking display," Gettle says, "with baskets and wooden crates, and dress in historic or ethnic clothing. Think about the total picture; make your stand look like it fell out of the 1850s or 1950s. But whatever you do, be unique. The more the better, as long as you're tasteful."

Another way to let potential customers know about your specialty melons is to sign up with Local Harvest. This website connects small local sustainable farms with local buyers across the United States.

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Choosing Melons for Your Patch

When selling to customers, market farmers, including myself, usually find that a combination of familiar favorites, along with new surprises each year, can help bring customers back again and again while doubling as a testing ground for new varieties that may become future crop staples.

The initial choice of possible melons for your summer patch is huge. Books and open-pollinated seed catalogues can give you a good start. Here, other growers are happy to share their favorites to help you make your decision.

Brad and Jenny Stufflebeam use the services of an expert to help make their choices.

"We try new melon varieties every year," Brad says. "This year's additions were selected with the help of our 7-year-old daughter, Casaba. They include Golden Beauty, Charentais, Banana, Kansas, Orangeglo, Tigger, Ogen, Golden Midget, Boule D'Or, and Black Diamond Yellow Flesh (we expect this to be a hit ... Black Diamond Red is famous around here)."

The Charentais that Stufflebeam mentions is also a favorite of Gettle's and many others. It is considered by Amy Goldman, author of *Melons for the Passionate Grower*, to be the favorite melon of the French, and has a "divine scent and ambrosial flavor."

The Charentais originated in western France's Poitou-Charentes region around the early 1900s. Gourmet and heritage seed collectors have found it grows well anywhere in the United States where other melons grow. Gettle describes it as "top of the line when it comes to marketing, and the two- to three-pound fruit sells for about \$3 per pound at many markets."

Gettle is also very impressed with Boule d'Or (Golden Perfection). "This is my favorite honeydew-type melon that was once a market melon in France and now is a winner for classy markets. The flavor will win you over to heirloom varieties with the first bite!"

Piel de Sapo (Toad Skin) is a very rare, white-fleshed melon. Gettle likes that it comes from Spain and has exceptional keeping quality. About eight inches long and oval, it is a late-season variety. "This variety can be sold over a long period," says Gettle, "and is good for autumn sales. With its fragrant, mellow flavor that is richly sweet, it can keep until Christmas."

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Growing Tips



"Duplicate Africa," say many successful melon growers. This means long, hot, dry summers with days in the 80s and nights in the 60s, and a very well-drained, fertile, sweet and light soil.

Josh Kirschenbaum, who has a degree in botany from Ohio University, gives further growing tips on how to accomplish this in North America: "Melons prefer a rich, well-drained soil. Planting in a raised bed is ideal. They also like to be fed. Putting a granular, organic fertilizer an inch or two below the seed or plant is usually adequate. Applying a liquid fertilizer that is high in nitrogen, such as Earth Juice Grow Formula 2-1-1, can get the young plants off to a good start. You might also want to side dress with fertilizer when the plants are starting to fruit. And, of course, compost is a great way to amend the soil to add nutrients."

Though it's possible to start seeds in pots, there are reasons why they may succeed better if direct seeded, even if it means waiting for warmer soils, or warming soils first with plastic.

"Some folks start the seeds indoors to get a jump-start on the season," Kirschenbaum said. "To be honest, though, I have found that direct seeding when the soil temperatures have reached 60 to 75 degrees F to work better for me. Melons have a taproot that does not like to be disturbed and if they are started indoors and kept in a pot too long, growth can be stunted. Furthermore, it takes time for the plant to get adjusted once transplanted."

According to Kirschenbaum, the pest to watch out for is the cucumber beetle. These spotted or striped insects chew on a variety of garden plants, including melons.

"For the cucumber beetles," Kirschenbaum says, "you can physically remove them from the plant and destroy them. For small problems, an insecticidal soap will work, and for large outbreaks, rotenone, pyrethrin or neem oil works well."

And about all that "African" heat that melons need?

"Melons need a minimum temperature of 70s during the day and 50s at night," Gettle recommends.

But do not despair if you live in one of those coastal climates, or have wetter, cooler or shorter summers than recommended for growing.

On my Island Meadow Farm, I've grown shorter season varieties in the cool, wet Pacific Northwest by building a horse manure hotbed below the melons, which generated heat. Heat absorbing and releasing stones were placed around the melon plants, and I warmed the growing area's soil with black plastic before planting, then placed each melon up higher on the stones closer to the sun than the surrounding ground.

A slight southern slope in the raised beds further warmed the area, and I used lots of fluffy, well-drained compost amended with dolomite to sweeten our native heavy clay soil.

Kirschenbaum agrees that even those in cooler climates can grow melons, and that plastic as well as cloches can have multiple benefits for growing melons.

"There are several methods to successfully growing melons in cooler or wetter climates," he says. "For starters, to warm up the soil faster in the spring, cover the beds or rows with plastic prior to planting. This will also help dry the soil from all of the winter precipitation. Melons should not be planted without protection before the danger of frost has passed, but warming the soil can still potentially add two to four weeks onto the growing season. To combat diseases that are common in the fall and to extend the growing season, consider putting a cloche or hoop house over the plants. This will prevent rainwater from touching the leaves and will also protect the plants from cold weather."

When considering when to apply cloches, remember that melons need to have insect pollination. If the melon patch is large and has enough varieties in blossom for a long period, it may warrant a beehive, which could produce organic melon-blossom honey--another specialty crop.

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Harvesting

Different varieties need different tests for ripeness. Many people have perfected, over time, their favorite method of knowing when specific melons are ripe.

"I have found," says Kirschenbaum, "that melons, except for watermelons, are ripe when they fall off the vine with little effort. In other words, a very slight tug of the fruit should be enough for the fruit to come off the vine. Watermelons,



however, are typically ready to harvest when the two tendrils that are nearest to the fruit turn brown."

On rare occasion, some varieties appear to not fall easily off the vine until overripe, and experience teaches harvesters when to cut the fruit sooner. Some harvesters watch for a color change, such as an overall brown turning yellow, or the part of the rind that touched the soil that is white turning to yellow.

Perhaps the Bushmen learned to check the tendrils or colors to know when their wild melons were ripe. Since the original varieties in wilds of Africa, melons have never lost their appeal across the globe and throughout history.

In ancient Egypt, Napoleon's soldiers strengthened themselves with melons. From there, as melons pushed on to the green gourmet gardens of France and then to America, young lads risked punishment for stealing from melon patches at night.

It's no wonder locally-grown vintage melons are becoming popular again after a few decades of commercial hybrids. They are certainly a customer draw on Brad and Jenny's Home Sweet Farm.

"We want to make food exciting, and that helps to get kids and families to eat real food, getting back in touch with agriculture." Brad says. "They begin to realize what they have been missing. It's not just organic; it's local, it's beyond organic. Providing old-fashioned nutrient dense food is exciting. We want everyone to taste and see the difference."

And what better way than with a candyland of sweet, aromatic melons!

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