



# Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center Master Gardener Community Garden

## Melons Lesson

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### Time

15 – 30 minutes

### Overview

The melons such as watermelon, cantaloupe, and honeydew are favorite summertime treats. This lesson explores the melon plants.

### Objectives

Students will:

- Learn how to plant, care for, and harvest melons.
- Discover the history of watermelons.
- Learn about the nutritional value of melons and how to prepare them in tasty ways.

### Supplies

- 1 large seeded watermelon, cut into slices
- 1 small seedless watermelon, cut into slices
- 1 cantaloupe or honeydew, cut into bite sized pieces
- Melons from the garden, if ready to harvest
- Cooler, plates, paper towels, cups
- Garbage bags

### Snack

Fresh melon

Juice/water

### Activity

If time allows and the kids are willing, a fun activity is a watermelon seed spitting contest. Another possibility is to explore ways to eat melon in different recipes, such as slushies or something similar.

### Sources

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/watermelon.cfm>

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/horticulture/M1262.html>

# Melons

**DO:** Begin by introducing yourself and the other Master Gardeners by first names.

**SAY:** Good afternoon. We are a group of Master Gardeners of Champaign County here to provide a gardening program today at JDC. In the fall and winter months we come every other week to give a lesson on plants, eating right, and taking care of the planet. In the spring and summer we work together with you to plant and maintain a vegetable and flower garden in the outside rec area. (depending on time... I became interested in gardening because... Does anyone else have gardening experience or a relative who gardens?)

Today's lesson will be... I am... with other volunteers...(introduce themselves).  
(Participants may introduce themselves also.)

Today we are going to talk about a favorite summertime garden treat, melons.

Melons, and in particular watermelon, is truly one of summertime's sweetest treats. It is fun to eat and good for you. Melons are tender, warm-season fruits. They are part of the cucurbit family along with zucchini, cucumbers, pumpkins and squash. A fruit is the edible part of a plant developed from a flower. The fleshy part of a fruit is the ovary of the plant, and surrounds the seeds.

Melon quality is a function of the sugar content of the fruit. High sugar content is achieved by avoiding all stress during the growing season. Stress comes from foliar diseases, insect pests, weeds, poor nutrition, and excesses or lack of water.

## **Growing Melons**

Melons can be grown in all parts of the country, but the warmer temperatures and longer growing season of southern areas especially favor this fruit. The sweetest melons grow during long hot summers.

Producing a good melon is a bit tricky in the short northern season like ours. In our part of the state we should look for varieties that mature quickly, sometimes referred to as 'early' varieties and instead of planting seeds, we can use transplants. Plant after the soil is warm and when all danger of frost is past.

Melons grow best on a sandy loam soil, although yields on clay soils can be increased significantly by mulching & using raised planting rows with black plastic film.

## **What do you think the black plastic does?**

It raises the temperature of the soil.

Melon vines require considerable space. Plant seed one inch deep in hills spaced 6 feet apart. Melons should be kept free from weeds by shallow hoeing and cultivation. The

plants have moderately deep roots and watering is seldom necessary unless the weather turns dry for a prolonged period. Water evenly and deeply when watering.

Insects such as striped cucumber beetles, squash bugs, squash vine borers can attack melon plants. Apply a suggested insecticide for control.

### **Harvesting Melons**

Harvesting is particularly critical because melons do not continue to ripen after they have been removed from the vine. They should be picked at full maturity. Many home gardeners experience difficulty in determining when melons such as watermelon and honeydew are ripe. No amount of thumping, tapping, sniffing, or shaking can actually give a clue to ripeness.

Use a combination of the following indicators:

- Light green, curly tendrils on the stem near the point of attachment of the melon usually turn brown and dry
- The surface color of the fruit turns dull
- The skin becomes resistant to penetration by the thumbnail and is rough to the touch
- The bottom of the melon (where it lies on the soil) turns from light green to a yellowish color (this is probably the best indicator)

Cantaloupe requires 35-45 days to mature from flowering, depending on the temperature. As the fruit matures the skin surface netting gets coarse and rough, the background color of the fruit turns from green to yellow, the surface color becomes dull, and the tendrils near the fruit (which look like curly strings) on the stem dry and turn brown.

### **Nutritional Value & Health Benefits**

Melons are low in calories and very nutritious. Watermelon is high in lycopene, second only to tomatoes. Recent research suggests that lycopene, a powerful antioxidant, is effective in preventing some forms of cancer and cardiovascular disease. Melons are also high in Vitamin C and Vitamin A.

### **Interesting Facts about Watermelons**

#### **Origins of Watermelons**

The origins of watermelons have been traced back over 5000 years ago to the time of King Tut in the Nile Valley of Egypt. Seeds were found in his tomb. But it is thought that watermelons were first found in Southern Africa in countries like Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, and in the Kalahari Desert.

The climate (average weather conditions) of the Kalahari Desert is very good for raising watermelons. The climate there is semi-arid (semi-arid means little or no rainfall, and the temperature changes drastically from morning to evening). Watermelons make great natural canteens.

Watermelon then traveled to China via the waterways of the Mediterranean Sea. It is thought watermelons were brought to the United States in the 1600's by African Slaves,

but there evidence that American Indians were cultivating them in the 1500's in the Mississippi Valley.

China raises more watermelon than any other country in the world. Turkey is second. Iran is 3<sup>rd</sup>, USA is 4<sup>th</sup>, and Egypt is 5<sup>th</sup>.

Today there are more than 100 different varieties of watermelons. The flesh may be red, pink, orange or yellow. There are seedless varieties and super-sweet round ones that fit nicely into the refrigerator. Seedless watermelons are self-sterile hybrids that develop normal-looking fruits but no fully developed seeds.

### **Eating Watermelon**

- Israel & Egypt it is eaten with feta cheese.
- China & Japan it is given as a hostess gift.
- Greeks introduced pickled watermelon rinds to this country.

### **How do you like to eat watermelon?**

### **Activity**

If time allows and kids are willing a fun activity is a **watermelon seed-spitting contest**: This is definitely an outdoor activity. While eating seeded watermelons, turns are taken at spitting out a watermelon seed to see who can launch it the farthest.

Another possibility is to explore ways to eat watermelons& other melons with different recipes such as slushies etc.