



GROWING MELONS IN NAPA COUNTY

By Dean Donaldson, Farm Advisor

The term 'melons' refers to members of the muskmelon and watermelon species. Muskmelons (*Cucumis melo*) include: cantaloupe, casaba, Charentais, Crenshaw, dudaim, honeydew, Santa Claus, snake, Persian, pickling and mango melons. Watermelons and citron melons are a different species (*Citrullus vulgaris*).

KINDS OF PLANT

Only 'cool climate', 'early', or 'short season' varieties are suited to Napa Valley weather. Locally successful kinds include: Ambrosia Hybrid, Burpee Hybrid, Fruit Punch Hybrid, Haogen, Harper Hybrid, Honeyshaw, Jenny Lind, Limelight, Ogden, Pineapple Hybrid, Samson, Sweet and Early, and Venus Hybrid. Watermelons require more heat than muskmelons. Try early, icebox-sized watermelon types such as New Hampshire Midget.

REQUIREMENTS

Melons require consistent hot weather for good growth and ripening. Melons are sensitive to frost and require lots of sun. Because Napa County weather varies from year to year, and at different locations within the county, local growers have varied experiences producing melons. While some years are 'good', in other years melons have difficulty ripening. Melons require consistent watering and fertilizing at moderate levels and are sensitive to attack from root rot in heavy soils. Bees are required to transfer pollen from male to female flowers. Fruit producing flowers open for one day only. Male flowers do not set fruit. Melons only interbreed with melons, not with cucumbers, squash or pumpkins.

SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING

Double dig the area you will plant to melons. Before planting work 5-10-10 fertilizer, or equivalent, into the soil at the rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet. Bury a second application of fertilizer in a furrow about a foot away from the stem when runners are about a foot long. A third application can be made after the first melons set. Promote early flowering and fruit set by planting transplants. You can start your seed in pots 4 to 6 weeks before setting out into the field. Melon seeds germinate best at soil temperature above 75° F. Warm the soil before planting seeds by covering the prepared ground with clear plastic film. Melons are planted mid May to mid June at a 6 x 6 foot spacing.

CARE

Vines require plenty of water when growing vigorously, but hold back on water after fruits reach baseball size. Melons are deep rooted – be sure to soak the soil to 4 feet deep. Once per week watering is normal for Napa County conditions. Excessive irrigation is bad – promotes root rot. It is normal for melon leaves to wilt in late afternoon during periods of hot weather, but they should recover by morning. If not, they require a deep soaking irrigation. Keep weeds out of melons until the vines shade the soil.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Young plants usually die from root diseases caused by overwatering. Root diseases are most serious, forcing crop rotation. Cucumber beetles, earwigs and flea beetles attack leaves of newly planted melons. Control them with a vegetable dust insecticide. Older plants may be attacked by aphids, whiteflies and powdery mildew which can limit production. Most new melon varieties are insect and mildew resistant and are relatively pest free if grown in full sun. Expect problems on older vines after early September. It is not practical to attempt control of whiteflies or powdery mildew because our climate favors them. Applications of insecticidal soap sprays can help most years, especially early in the season. Vines infected with mosaic virus should be destroyed.

HARVESTING

Most types require about 90 growing days to reach maturity. Ripe fruit 'smell ripe'. Tests for ripeness vary with type and variety, so no one test fits all melon types. Some types develop a circular crack where the stem meets the fruit. These separate ('slip') easily when the fruit is lifted. Other types are ripe when they develop a soft spot on the blossom end, while others simply turn yellow. Harvested fruit do not keep well.

TRICKS

Plant late in the spring into warm, well drained soil. Use disease resistant transplants. Water at planting and not again until plant wilts in afternoon. Then deep soak weekly. Reduce water during fruit ripening. Remove developing late season fruits that will never ripen. Keep weeds out for at least 6 weeks after planting.

Additional Reading:

Home Vegetable Gardening, UC ANR Publication #21444, 1992.

Pests of the Garden and Small Farm, UC ANR Publication #3332, 1990.

Planting Guide for Napa County, UCCE Napa County mimeo, 1982.

Mixed Melon Production in California, UC ANR Publication #7209, 1996.

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