

Watermelon: Any Way You Slice It

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LEOLA (Lancaster Co.) — For all the people who believe watermelon is a fruit — surprise — they're wrong. The watermelon is a member of the cucurbitaceae or gourd family, so it's technically a vegetable and not a fruit.

That doesn't mean you can't serve it as a fruit. About 72 percent of people in a recent survey said that they use watermelon as a snack and 48 percent serve watermelon at a picnic. But the National Watermelon Promotion Board doesn't want you to limit your watermelon to those methods of serving. They have a whole lot of ideas. According to the Watermelon Board, once you learn to regard watermelons as kin to cucumbers and zucchinis — also cucurbits — the possible preparations grow wild with your imagination.

Already innovative chefs use watermelons often in salads and sauces. Some of these recipes are printed with this article, but before you try them, read about the watermelons that grow to a tremendous size from what appears to be an insignificant and inadequate root system.

It is believed that watermelon cultivation goes back at least 4,000 years to the Egyptians whose artistic remains have recorded them. In the 1850s, David Livingston, the famed missionary explorer, said that Africa was the place that watermelons originated. He found great tracts of watermelon growing wild in the Kalaharie Desert and the semi-tropical regions of Africa.

Although colonists brought watermelon to the U.S., early French explorers found Indians

growing watermelons in the Mississippi Valley.

According to Don Robinson, Eastern Lancaster County Adult Farmer program instructor, more people grow watermelons in the area than previously. While many watermelons were transported from the South to here, that is now changing during the watermelon season. Now many farmers grow them and sell them to supermarket buyers at the Leola Produce Auction and other outlets.

Watermelon plants are trailing annuals with stems as long as 15 feet and branched tendrils. Watermelon needs large quantities of space and nutrients to grow well.

The most popular varieties are the Sangria, an oblong melon with a nice rind color, and a solid, heavy melon; the Mirage, similar to the Sangria, has a sandier grainier flesh that some people prefer; and the old-time favorite Crimson Sweet is used as a standard with which new varieties are compared.

In keeping with smaller-sized households, the smaller watermelons are popular today. The Yellow Babies with their yellow flesh are a novelty melon that add variety to the menu.

Watermelons are also popular because they are a nearly perfect food for dieters. 100 grams of melon has only 30 calories. They are low in sodium and provide a good source of vitamins A and C, potassium, and other minerals.

Although three out of four homes serve sliced watermelon, those families that do not serve it say it's because watermelon is too messy and seedy. For this reason the seedless varieties are really growing in popularity. Although

the seedless varieties taste great, they are a bit more expensive since they are much harder to germinate.

The greenhouse is the best place to germinate these melons, which adds extra cost and time for the required transplanting.

But new ideas for cutting the costs for growing the seedless varieties are surfacing. This year, a local grower tried something different. To create a mini-greenhouse effect, he laid black plastic mulch on the ground, cut holes in the plastic to plant the seeds, put an old tire on top of the hole and covered it with the black plastic. This created heat, which the seeds need to germinate, and created a mini-greenhouse effect by allowing him to plant early.

Watermelons do meet some obstacles while growing. The melons need to be sprayed to protect them from spider mites. Robinson suggests Kelthane.

Melons are also susceptible to mildew disease. Regular sprays control the mildew disease that is more prevalent in larger fields.

Growers seldom have a problem with watermelons splitting. If the melons do split, it is a result of heavy rains that produce too rapid growth.

Generally, the prime harvest for melons is from July 10 to Labor Day. This year, the weather induced earlier melons.

Prices vary depending upon the watermelon crop in the South. Last year, area watermelons brought high prices because the South didn't have much rain. This year drought in Pennsylvania has produced significantly smaller watermelons, although the flavor is good.

Customers often ask the age on question: How can I tell if a watermelon is ripe? There are no easy answers for the store customer, but for the grower, several methods are reliable.

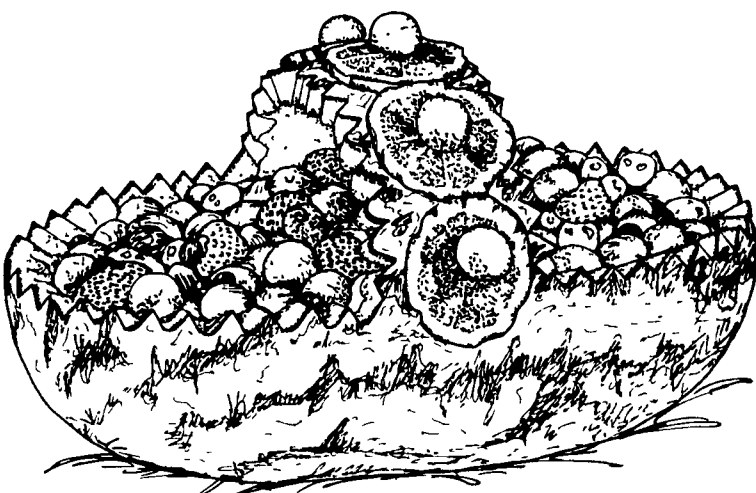
An instrument called a refractometer tests the sweetness of melons. It costs about \$100, too steep for individual use, but researchers, growers and buyers for grocery stores use them. The refractometer measures the percentage of sucrose, which enables the grower to determine when the melon is ready to pick. To test the sucrose, the melon must be cut and a piece of the flesh placed on the glass of the refractometer. Within a few seconds, the percentage can be read similar to a thermometer. Recently Robinson tested melons at the Leola Produce Auction in Leola. The melons registered between a 10 to 12 reading, which



Don Robinson checks the tendrils on the watermelon to see if it is ripe.



Don Robinson tests the sweetness of the watermelons with a refractometer.



Make a watermelon fruit salad boat. Cut the rind into a natural fruit bowl, and fill with watermelon balls and slices of other melons, pineapple, grapes, and apples. A book "Melon Garnishing" is available from International Culinary Consultants, P.O. Box 2202, Elberon Station, Long Branch, N.J. 07740. The book has more than 30 different sculptures to carve out of melons. Check with them about the price.



Despite its hardy appearance, watermelon is actually quite fragile and susceptible to breakage, bruising, and temperature extremes. That's why growers handpick watermelon. This picture was taken at the Leola Produce Auction where many Lancaster County growers bring wagonloads of the melons to sell to wholesale buyers.

is good. An excellent reading may go as high as 14, although that is unusual.

Generally, growers check the ripeness of melons by examining the tendrils on the vine. If the tendrils next to the watermelon are dead, that indicates the melon is ripe. The underbelly, where the melon lies against the soil, of the melon also changes from a light green color to yellow to white when ready to pick.

Watermelon sugar content does not increase after it comes off the vine. Melons are like books — you can't always tell the content by the cover. When you buy a watermelon, look for symmetric shape and a velvety bloom — a dull, rather than shiny surface.

Thumping will get you nowhere. "Most people really don't know what they are thumping for," Robinson said. "Some think it should sound hollow, but that is how an unripe melon sounds."

Many consumers believe the only sure way to tell if a watermelon is ripe is to cut it. It's often worth the extra cost to make sure they have top quality. If a watermelon is fully mature, seeds are usually dark brown or black. Avoid white heart — a hard white streak running lengthwise through a watermelon.

After melons are picked, they should be kept at room temperature, as chilling affects flavor and color. They are best consumed within a few days of purchase.

If you eager to give watermelon a new twist, here are some recipes worth trying.

MELON SEEDS

Melon seeds are edible. Dry them, put them in a fry pan, and pour some salted water over them. Stir over the heat until the water has evaporated. Eat them for a snack.

WATERMELON ONION FRESCO SALAD

4 cups cubed watermelon
 ½ cup thinly sliced and quartered sweet onions
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
 ¼ cup raspberry and blueberry vinegar
 Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
 Lettuce leaves

If seeds are present, remove from the watermelon; toss watermelon, onions, and basil until well-mixed. Pour vinegar over watermelon mixture; toss gently to combine mixture. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve on lettuce. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

WATERMELON FIRE AND ICE SALSA

3 cups chopped watermelon
 ½ cup green peppers
 2 tablespoons lime juice
 1 tablespoon chopped cilantro
 1 tablespoon green onion
 1 to 2 tablespoons Jalapeno peppers
 ½ tablespoon garlic salt

Combine all ingredients in melon shell; mix well. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour. Makes 3 cups. Serve with chips or on sliced oranges or cheese-filled manicotti.

FROZEN WATERMELON

Melon can be frozen to last all year long. Cut firm melon into balls or cubes and place them in freezer containers. For each pint, mix ½ cup sugar with 1½ cups water and heat until the sugar dissolves. Chill this mixture, then pour over the melon pieces and freeze.

If you grow or sell watermelons, the National Watermelon Promotion Board has tips to help increase your profits. Send for information: NWPB, P.O. Box 140065, Orlando, FL 32814-0065 or call (407) 895-5100.