

## Muskmelon

Other than watermelon, melons grown in MD fall into the species *Cucumis melo*. The “cantaloupes” that we so look forward to in mid-summer are actually muskmelons- the Reticulatus Group within *Cucumis melo*. These melons are netted (rough skin) and usually slip from their stems when ripe. The true cantaloupes are in the Cantalupensis Group. They are usually smaller than muskmelons, are not netted, and do not slip from their stems when ripe. True cantaloupes are not typically grown in the U.S. Honeydew, casaba, and crenshaw melons are in yet another group within *Cucumis melo*.

Muskmelons are a sweet juicy fruit that grows on a vine. They are very similar in appearance to the cantaloupe. Some have a musky odor with a rough textured rind while others are smoother and relatively fragrance free.

Muskmelons are a warm-season crop requiring a long growing season, about 80 to 100 days. When grown on black plastic mulch muskmelons will produce larger and earlier harvests. Run a soaker hose or drip irrigation line under the plastic, if possible. Most muskmelon cultivars are not well suited to small gardens because of their large space requirements.

### Planting:

Muskmelon plants should be spaced 2-3 ft. apart in rows that are 6 ft. apart. They can also be grown in hills (mounds of soil spaced 3 ft. apart with 3 seeds planted per hill) or on a trellis.

You can plant seeds 1 inch deep in loose, fertile

garden soil and thin to the recommended spacing after they emerge. Plant after all danger of frost is past and the soil is warm. You can also start seeds in 3-inch diameter pots three to four weeks prior to planting. When muskmelons are grown from transplants they can be harvested as much as four weeks earlier than melons grown directly from seed.

As the plants grow, gently lift and move vines in one or two directions. This saves space and keeps your garden orderly.

Growing on a trellis allows closer spacing (rows 3 ft. apart), but each trellised melon (cultivars that produce small fruit) must be supported by a sling made of a material that dries quickly to prevent rot. Old nylon stockings, cheesecloth, and other netlike materials make good slings.

### Cultivation:

For the flower to develop into a fruit, pollen must be carried by bees from a male flower on the same plant or on different plants, to the female flower (the one with the tiny swollen melon). Poor melon set is common during rainy weather when bees are inactive. Avoid using pesticides during the bloom period.

Many conditions can affect the muskmelon harvest. These include cool, wet weather and heavy rain. Fruit resting on the soil may be eaten by insects or start to rot. Place cardboard or straw under developing fruits to avoid damage.

- **Fertilizing:** Medium feeder. Use a starter solution for transplants. Side-dress plants

with a balanced fertilizer when fruits begin to form, but avoid excessive nitrogen which can lower yield and quality. Late-maturing varieties may need some side-dressing at fruit set.

- **Watering:** Keep plants well-watered through the growing season and stop watering 1 week before harvest.
- **Weeding:** Hand-pull weeds or cut young weeds at the soil line with a sharp hoe. Avoid any deep cultivation around plants. If not using black plastic mulch, cover soil with an organic mulch before vines spread.

#### **Harvesting:**

Muskmelons are at their peak for flavor when harvested at “full slip,” that is, when the stem separates easily at the point of attachment. Handle fruits gently.

#### **Storage and Preservation:**

Store in medium-cool (40° - 50° F), moist (80%-85% RH) conditions.

#### **Nutrition:**

A source of Vitamins C, A & B6, folate, niacin and potassium

#### **Preparation & Use:**

Wash melon thoroughly with soap and water to avoid contaminating flesh with soil microorganisms from the rind; cut into slices to eat with a spoon or remove rind and cut into slices or chunks.

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