WATERMELON (Citrullus lanatus)

WATERMELON
A member of the Cucumber family, native to tropical Africa, the watermelon needs a long, dry growing season.

The planting and culture of Watermelons
Soil, for good watermelons, should be light, fertile, deep, and well drained. A pH of 5.5 to 6.5 is preferred. Preparation of the soil should begin the fall before planting. At that time, turn under manure to a depth of six to eight inches. If there is a plentiful supply of manure on hand, dig in an inch layer of it all over the watermelon bed.

If the supply is limited, a few forkfuls may be dug into the hills, and left to decompose during the winter, so that the nutrients have time to leach down into the soil to a depth where the vine's deepest roots will find them. A handful of phosphate rock and one of greensand or granite dust may be incorporated into the hills at the same time. Lime should not be used unless the pH is below 5.

Starting Watermelon seeds
In cool areas, or where the growing season is short, seed may be started indoors in peat or compressed manure pots and moved to the garden when all danger of frost is past. A greenhouse or hotbed makes it possible to start the seed eight weeks before field-planting time. If they must be started in the home, sow them just six weeks before field planting. Otherwise they will become leggy. Plant three or four seeds in each pot and thin to one vine. Later, when setting out plants, place three pots in each hill. After the vines have made a foot or two of growth, thin each hill to one or two vines.

If seeds are to be started directly in the garden, space hills six to 12 feet apart, depending upon the variety planted and the fertility of the soil. On rich soil with high summer temperatures, the plants will grow and fruit will set rapidly.

In the South, practically all melons are started in the open. Seeds are planted ten to 14 days before the last expected frost, so that the seedlings will come up as soon as possible after the frost. If there is any danger that frost may overtake the seedlings, make two plantings in each hill a week apart, putting in half the seeds each time. A total of eight to ten seeds should be planted in each hill in a circle eight to 13 inches in diameter. Cover the seeds with an inch of soil. After the first true leaves appear on the young plants, reduce the number of plants to four or five per hill. Gradually thin them as they grow larger, until only one or two strong vines are left.

Mulching your Watermelon vines
Watermelon vines should be mulched to keep down the weeds and conserve moisture, but the mulch should not be applied until the soil is thoroughly warm. In the meantime, keep the area clean with shallow hoeing. Straw, hay or chopped leaves are the best mulching materials to use. Spread them in a six-inch mulch over the entire watermelon patch and draw the mulch up to the
base of the vines. This should be done before fruits begin to form, because the small fruits may be damaged by handling. The best time to apply mulch is right after a rain, when the soil is thoroughly damp.

**Thinning your Watermelon patch**
Commercial growers often thin fruits on the vines in order to produce larger and more uniform melons and to speed ripening when no more than two melons are left on each plant. In the home garden, where melon size is not so important, the vines may be permitted to set more fruit, but late-set fruit should be removed. When too few hot days and warm nights are left for maturing fruit, all blossoms should be removed from the plants before they begin to develop. The sooner these are removed, the more plant energy will be diverted to the development of the early-set fruit.

**Harvesting Watermelon**
Melons are most flavorful when permitted to ripen on the vine. Experience is the best judge of ripeness, and none of the many ways advanced to choose a ripe melon is infallible. According to Mark Twain, a green melon says "pink" or "pank" when thumped with the knuckles; a ripe one says "punk."

A less subjective way to determine ripeness is to take a look at the melon and vines. The fruit is apt to be ripe when the underside turns from white to yellow and at least three tendrils on each side of the melon are dead.

**Varieties of Watermelon**
Charleston Gray adapts to climates throughout the United States. It has an 85-day maturation period, and is fiber-free and disease resistant. Dixie Queen is wilt resistant and requires 90 warm days to reach maturity. Fordhook Hybrid bears small-seeded fruits and is hardy in the North. Also recommended for the North are Crimson Sweet, New Hampshire Midget, Golden Midget, and Sugar Baby. They are well adapted to cool climates and have growing periods of 65 to 90 days.