

Watermelon

(*Citrullus lanatus*)

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Watermelon can be planted throughout the year in the Top End. During the Wet they should be planted on raised beds or hills in well drained areas. It will also be necessary to spray regularly during this period to control mildews. Watermelons take up a lot of space and in the home garden, this can be compensated for by planting them during the Wet when the variety of vegetables which can be grown is limited. The seed bed must be well prepared and deeply dug (20-30 cm deep). The seeds are direct sown 2 cm deep leaving 1 m between planting stations and 3 m between rows. At each planting station 4 seeds are sown. When the seedlings reach the 2 leaf stage they are thinned out to 1-2 plants by nipping off the weaker plants. It is important in the early stages to keep the area free of weeds until the vines can cover the ground and shade them out. Care must be taken if removing weeds by chipping not to penetrate too deeply as many of the plant's roots are near the surface and could be damaged. Deformed fruit should be removed from the vine allowing only the better fruits to develop. Some people recommend allowing only two fruits to develop on each plant, which can result in some very large melons being produced. As with all cucurbits watermelons produce separate male and female flowers (see Rockmelons and Pumpkins).

FERTILISER

An application of 200-300 g/m² of dolomite before soil preparation ensures good incorporation of lime into the soil and will benefit the crop.

Two kilos of well rotted animal manure or compost buried at each planting site can be beneficial. A complete fertiliser mix high in phosphorous should be worked into the soil at a rate of 50-60 g/station several days before planting.



A side dressing of the same fertiliser mix at 30 g/site is applied (15-20 cm from the stem) when the runners are 30-40 cm long. A further side dressing at the same rate when the plants begin flowering could improve production.

WATERING

Water requirements are not as critical as with other cucurbits. However, the best results are obtained with regular watering as required.

HARVESTING

The first fruits should be ready for picking within 3 months of planting. There are several methods of identifying ripe melons:

1. A dull hollow sound is heard when the melon is given a sharp tap (this method must only be used in the early morning when the fruit is cool);
2. when the tendril nearest the melon has withered and died;
3. when the bottom of the melon changes colour from white to cream or yellow;
4. cut a 25 mm wedge out of the melon and sample. Melons should be cut from the vines leaving about 5 cm of stem attached to the fruit, this reduces the possibility of stem rot infecting the fruit during storage.

PESTS AND DISEASES

See Rockmelons

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