

SFA

Seeds for Africa

Melons

Choose a site that gets full sun and good air circulation. Make sure the spot is protected from strong winds - melons won't perform at all if they're cold.

Amend the soil with plenty of compost or well-rotted manure to ensure fertility and good drainage. (Construct raised beds if your climate is cold or humid or your soil is heavy). The soil's pH should be from 6.0 to 7.0.

Prepare the bed a few weeks before planting time by making hills and covering the space with a sheet of black plastic mulch - assuming that yours is not an ornamental garden.

Start seeds indoors one or two weeks before the last expected frost.

Harden off seedlings, whether home grown or store-bought, and move them to the garden three weeks after the last frost.

Cut a slit in the plastic sheet to accommodate each transplant, and set it into the soil at about an inch deeper than it was growing in its container. Check your seed packet or plant label for spacing. It will vary from 4 to 6 feet for most varieties, 2 feet for bush types.

Mulch with straw, salt hay or compost if you haven't used black plastic, and water thoroughly with compost tea.

Cover the planting area with floating row covers to protect plants from insects and cold winds, but remove the covers as soon as flowers appear: Unless insects can pollinate them, you'll have no crop. When plants begin to set fruit, spray them with fish emulsion or compost tea.

Slide a board under each melon when it's about half-grown to prevent it from rotting.

Make sure plants get at least an inch of water a week at the beginning, but unless a prolonged dry spell strikes, stop watering when the fruits begin to ripen - they'll develop better flavour if they don't get too much moisture during the last week or two.

Wait until melons are fully ripe before you harvest them - they won't ripen off the vine.

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