

SFA

Seeds for Africa

Watermelon

Choose a site that gets full sun, is protected from chilly winds - especially in spring and fall - and gets good air circulation. A gentle, south-facing slope is ideal.

Dig plenty of organic matter into the soil to provide the conditions watermelons need: a light, sandy, fertile loam that is well-drained yet retains moisture. A near-neutral pH is best, but watermelons will tolerate soil as acid as 5.5.

Buy watermelon plants at a nursery; plan to plant them after both air and soil temperatures have reached 65 degrees F (usually two to three weeks after the last frost). Otherwise, sow seeds directly into the garden. Direct sowing is best if your growing season is long enough for the plants to mature (check your seed packet). Watermelons don't like to be transplanted.

Prepare the soil well at planting time, even if you've added plenty of organic matter earlier. For each plant, dig a hole two feet in diameter and a foot deep, and add at least a shovelful of compost or well-cured manure and a trowel or two of bone meal.

Set hardened-off transplants into the ground at the depth they were growing in their pots. Sow seeds an inch deep in hills. (See "How to Harden off Transplants" and "How to Start Vegetable Seeds Outdoors.") Water thoroughly with compost tea.

Allow plenty of space between plants. Depending on the variety, they should be anywhere from 3 feet (for small bush types) to 12 feet apart (for giant ramblers).

Apply a thick organic mulch to hold in moisture, deter weeds and keep the melons clean as they grow. Or, if you don't care how your patch looks, use a black plastic mulch, with slits cut for the plants. It will hold in heat better than any other soil covering.

Cover the plants with floating row covers to keep the air warm, and give young plants an inch of water a week.

Remove all covers as soon as flowers appear so that bees and other insects can pollinate the plants, and begin fertilizing with compost tea every three weeks.

Note when the plants are in full bloom: watermelons should be ready to pick about 35 days later.

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