

Tips for Growing Giant Watermelons

Hints from James White (JamesAllenWhite@gmail.com) on growing watermelons in Minnesota.

When trying to choose which fruit to keep on a plant (and in the end, there should be only one), select for the longest un-pollinated fruit with the nicest shape. This will help produce the longest melons.

Here's my top tricks for growing watermelons

- 1) Genetics, especially ones that have been selected for plant structure, and then fruit size.
- 2) Prepare the soil around the plant. I remove the old dirt from the plant spot and replace with a 10-10-10 granular, mixed in and then a good foot or two cover of compost. I get mine from the local compost facility. I have even added cow manure under the plants, but that is tricky and subject to weeds. Remember that watermelons do not tap deep, but spread roots out over a large surface, so prepare a good 8 to 12 foot circle. I have yet to see a plant tap down more than 16 inches.
- 3) Use hook stakes (candy cane shaped) to lightly tack down vines. Use lots of these since they allow you to arrange your vines, and they also encourage the vines to root down. They will help you survive a sudden wind storm. Recover the stacks at the end of the season for re-use.
- 4) You should definitely hand pollinate the female flowers to get full finished fruit.
- 5) Consider very highly the longest melons at pollination time when choosing the melon to leave on the vine when culling. This is the length of the un-pollinated female fruit. Anything 3.0 CM or longer is best, but my best are often around 2.8 cm. The length of this fruit greatly determines the length of the final melon.
- 6) Pollinate the first few melons. For Minnesota, I have to set fruit by July 8th, but setting by the end of June is preferred, and some of my best were set on around June 20th. Any fruit that sets after July 8th should be culled as soon as possible, if you have better choices. I believe that a plant can decide to work on a new melon, instead of an existing melon, so it is best to remove all but the one melon you want to compete with. It's tempting to keep two melons, but don't do it. In the end, there can be only one.
- 7) Pollinate between plants, since the plants tend to be self-sterile. So use males from a different plant to pollinate the female flower. They can be from the same stock of seeds, but should be from different plants.
- 8) Give your young melons (the fruit) a nice under base of sugar sand (sandbox sand) to keep the melon drier underneath. Replace this base of sand with boards like 2x4s or 2x6s to get the fruit off the ground once they are around 50 pounds. This prevents rot. Position board perpendicular to the fruit. Rot is a serious problem and this is the number one thing you can do to prevent rot. I have never had a fruit rot that was on boards, but I have had up to two per year rot when they sat directly on the ground.
- 9) Build a little protection over the fruit to prevent sun scalding. Some 9 gauge metal hoops with burlap sacks hanging over work great. Clip them on with clothespins. It helps keep the skin on the fruit pliable, and keeps the fruit from ripening too quickly. This is extremely important for growing large melons.
- 10) Water-soluble fertilizers work great and soak in nicely. So does rabbit manure tea, made by half filling a large bucket with rabbit manure, and then filling the bucket with water. After a few days, pour the liquid through a screen and use to side dress the stump. This really does work, and I raise some rabbits just for this purpose.
- 11) Vary the fertilizer depending on if you want to grow plant or fruit. High nitrogen in early season (like Miracle Grow), extremely low nitrogen when fruit is growing (like 5-50-17), and high nitrogen again when weather turns cold. This will help limit vine growth when you are trying to grow fruit and increases density of fruit.
- 12) Do not trim back vines or bury vines. This hint comes from an old world record holder, but I have been following it so far. The jury is still out on this, since I know when I pin down vines it encourages rooting. I don't know if this is the equivalent of burying the vines, or if burying will cause rot.

- 13) Slowly slide back large watermelons as they grow to relieve pressure on the plant vine. Do this instead of moving the feeder vine. The fruit grows both directions, so this helps remove pressure on the stem end.
- 14) Do not allow vines to get too close to the melon, and especially do not allow the fruit to sit on a vine. The vine will rot and rot will spread to the fruit, and that's a bad thing.
- 15) Drip irrigation. This is very easy, and can be a critical part of growing the giants. Get yourself an old 300-gallon plastic tank from a farmer so you don't have to fill it too often, and buy plastic piping and some irrigation drip emitters. I have also used individual sprinkler mounted on poles. One per plant. I have switched to a shower set up, with a sprinkler head on a post for each watermelon plant. I can turn on the water and cover all the stumps at one time.

Added Tips for Northern Growers

1. Start the plants indoors in early to mid March. The plants should be about 2 to 4 feet long when then go into the garden. Use a large pot for transplanting. I use 1 foot sections of 9" black corrugated drain tile stood on end in a grow tray. I cut these tubes in half, drill holes along the seam and zip tie them back together. That way I can slide them into hole, cut the ties up the side, and remove the container. The plants never even knew they were transplanted. No shock.
2. Put the plants into the garden around mid May when there is little chance of frost, but put plants under metal hoops and Remay blankets. Leave the Remay on until the plants start crawling out from under it. Usually early to mid June. Make sure you hook down the plant in the direction you want the primary vine to grow. I reuse these same hoops to cover watermelons to prevent sunscald.

Web Sites on Giant Watermelon growing

This is a good history of watermelon growing in Arkansas. They are a professional giant melon growing company, and set the world record in 2005. [Giant watermelons grown in Hope Arkansas](http://giantwatermelons.com/) (<http://giantwatermelons.com/>)

This is Bob Dwyer's website. It has some interesting information, but generally just chronicles his past growing experience. [Melonman.com](http://melonman.com/) (<http://melonman.com/>)

This is the website for the Central Wisconsin Pumpkin Growers organization. They run a weigh-in celebration on the first Saturday in October. They generally have an attendance of around 20,000 people. <http://www.cwpg.org/pumpkinfest.html>

Look to the Watermelon Growing Forum at www.bigpumpkins.com for the best information and access to people that grow melons.

I believe this is where I buy my floating row covers (Remay blankets)

[Gardens Alive! Environmentally Responsible Products That Work](http://www.gardensalive.com/) (<http://www.gardensalive.com/>)

I include this sheet whenever I send out seeds, and people ask what they can send me, so here's my comment.

If you wish to send me seeds, that is great. I generally do not want giant watermelon or giant pumpkin seeds. Of course if you happen to be the world record holder or near to be for watermelon, then go ahead and send me watermelon seeds. I do have a large garden and I am interested in many things, but in particular seeds for giant vegetables and flowers.

Send SASBE (Self Addressed Stamped Bubble Envelope) to me, and I will send you ample seeds from my largest melons. Include some seeds for me from something you grow, if you have any. If you don't have an envelope, then just send me an email, and I will send you seeds anyway. I like to see lots of growers of giant watermelons!

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