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HOW TO PICK A RIPE MELON

Telling when a melon is ready to be harvested can be a challenge, or it may be quite easy. It all depends on the type of melon. Let's start with the easy one. Muskmelons are one of those crops that tell you when they are ready to be picked. This can help you not only harvest melons at the correct time but also choose good melons when shopping. As a melon ripens, a layer of cells around the stem softens so the melon detaches easily from the vine. This is called "slipping" and will leave a dish-shaped scar at the point of stem attachment. When harvesting melons, put a little pressure where the vine attaches to the fruit. If ripe, it will release or "slip." When choosing a melon from those that have already been harvested, look for a clean, dish-shaped scar. Also, ripe melons have a pleasant, musky aroma if the melons are at room temperature.

Watermelons can be more difficult and growers often use several techniques to tell when to harvest.

1. Look for the tendril that attaches at the same point as the melon to dry and turn brown. On some varieties this will need to be completely dried before the watermelon is ripe. On others it will only need to be in the process of turning brown.

2. The surface of a ripening melon develops a surface roughness (sometimes called "sugar bumps") near the base of the fruit.

3. Ripe watermelons normally develop a yellow color on the "ground spot" when ripe. This is the area of the melon that contacts the ground.

Honeydew melons are the most difficult to tell when they are ripe because they do not "slip" like muskmelons. Actually, there is one variety that does slip called Earlidew, but it is the exception to the rule. Ripe honeydew melons become soft on the flower end of the fruit. The "flower end" is the end opposite where the stem attaches. Also, honeydews should change to a light or yellowish color when ripe, but this varies with variety.

Weird Squash, Cucumbers or Melons

Occasionally we receive a call from someone who has a squash (or cucumber or melon) that just doesn't look like what was supposedly planted. They often wish to know if that fruit had cross-pollinated with another vegetable close by. In such cases, the gardener is assuming that cross-pollination will affect the fruit. Such is not the case. The characteristics of the fruit is determined by the mother plant and is not affected by cross-pollination. However, there will be a problem if seed is saved for the next year from a flower that was cross-pollinated. All bets are off on what you will get if that happens. So, how do we end up with this weird fruit? Though it could be that the gardener had forgotten exactly what he planted, more likely is that the seed he planted had been cross-pollinated before packaging. Another possibility is that it came from seed that came from fruit that had rotted in the garden the previous year. Regardless, don't worry about planting different cultivars of squash or cucumbers or melons close to one another. Though cross-pollination may occur in some cases, the fruit will not be affected.

Don't forget about the Master Gardener Program!

Just a quick reminder about the upcoming fall Master Gardener class. This years class will start on September 13th and end on December 13th. If you are interested come by the Extension office at 206 N. Griffith, El Dorado (across from the Dairy Queen), or you can give us a call at

(316) 321-9660. Or you can access our website <http://www.butler.k-state.edu/> and follow the horticulture link to a printable copy of the application form. We will be accepting applications until August 31st this year.

Spider Mites

Most spider mites like hot and dry weather and we are seeing populations start to explode. Look for stippling on the upper surface of the leaves as well as some fine webbing on the underside of the leaves. These tiny arthropods (they are not true insects) are often difficult to see due to their size and their habit of feeding on the underside of leaves. If mites are suspected, hold a sheet of white paper beneath a leaf and tap the leaf. Mites will be dislodged and can be seen as tiny specks on the paper that move about. Spider mite control can be challenging. A strong jet of water can be used to remove the mites but may not be as easy as it sounds. A high-pressure directed spray is needed to dislodge the mites. Since spider mites feed on the underside of the leaves, the spray is most effective if it comes from below. This can be difficult to accomplish with a thumb over the end of the hose. Some gardeners use a water wand hooked to a shut-off valve. The water breaker is then replaced by a brass nozzle. Specialized spray wands can also be used. For example, Mite-Y-Fine (miteyfine.com) has a wand that makes spraying the underside of leaves easy. Spraying once will not be enough. It is recommended to use 3 sprays spaced 3 to 4 days apart. Horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps (Safer's, for example) can also be helpful. Spray early in the morning when temperatures are cooler and plants have rehydrated. Resprays will likely be needed.

Blister Beetles

These beetles are notorious for quickly stripping vegetables (especially tomatoes) and ornamentals of their foliage. There are several species of blister beetles which vary in size (often between 0.5-0.75 inch long) and color (such as black, gray or brown-striped), but most are recognized by their elongated, narrow, cylindrical, soft bodies with middle body part (thorax) narrower than the head or wingcovers. Some home gardeners like to use hand picking as a nonchemical method for controlling these large insects. However, wear gloves and use caution because these beetles contain a substance called cantharidin. This chemical is an irritant capable of blistering internal and external body tissues exposed to the chemical. On tender human skin, body fluids of adult blister beetles may cause large, erect, watery blisters. Chemical control of blister beetles is also possible and may be the only practical method of control if populations are large. Cyfluthrin (Bayer Vegetable and Garden Insect Spray) and permethrin (Bonide Eight and Hi-Yield Lawn, Garden, Pet and Livestock Insect Control) are recommended. Cyfluthrin and permethrin have a 0 day waiting period on tomatoes.

Raccoons and Sweet Corn

It seems the official sweet corn inspector should be the raccoon as they seem to harvest the sweet corn the day before it is to be picked. The only effective control measure I have had success with is fencing; either electric or kennel fencing. First are some suggestions for electric fencing. Other designs may very well work but this is what has worked in my garden.

- Two or more wires must be used. Place the first about 5 inches above the ground and the second 4 inches above the first (or 9 inches above ground). Raccoons must not be able to crawl under, go between or go over the wires without being shocked.

- Fence posts used for electric fences work well for this application (go figure), as do the insulators used to support the electric wire.

- It is much easier to use the woven electric wire with strands of wire embedded than to use a solid metal wire. The woven wire is easier to bend around corners and to roll up when done for the year.

- Though both the plug-in and battery operated fences work, the battery operated types allow more versatility in where corn is grown. One set of batteries is usually sufficient for the season. In my case, I pull the battery out of an old tractor that is not used often. It will also last the season if fully charged at the beginning. My fence is probably on for a total of a month.

- Start the charger before the corn is close to being ripe. Once raccoons get a taste of the corn, they are more difficult to discourage.

- Control weeds near the wire. Weeds can intercept the voltage if they touch a wire and allow raccoons entry beyond the weed.

- Check the wire occasionally to make sure you have current. This can be done easily (but unpleasantly) by touching the wire. There are also tools that will measure the voltage available for sale. They are worth the money.

As mentioned earlier, kennel fencing can also be used. Make sure that the panels are tied together well enough that raccoons can't squeeze through the corners.