

Cultural Details: **Melon**

Introduction

In general, melons are lovers of warmth, which makes them short season crops for the U.K., whereas in warm countries they are grown in succession for export to temperate zones. While they cannot be considered as a major crop in the U.K., melons are sure to sell readily to the public or wholesale outlet. It can be treated as a glasshouse or poly tunnel crop. Plants sell readily in limited quantities to the gardening public.

Seed is sown March-April under glass, planted April-May, and harvested July-August or September.

Push the large (approx 30 per gram) seeds into 8-10cm pots of free-draining compost. Blocks can be used provided they are not too firm - this can predispose the roots to rotting. Germinate at 21°C or above - the seed can also be chitted in blotting paper, and potted up with tweezers. Plants are grown on in good light at around 15-18°C and may need support with canes, and some liquid feeding if basal leaves begin to yellow. Avoid overwatering as this can cause stem rot.

Whatever planting method is used, the planting area must be adjacent to suitable support if the melons are to be trained in conventional fashion - allowing a spacing of 75-90cm between the plants.

Planting into an unheated glasshouse or polytunnel must not take place until the compost or soil is sufficiently warm (18-20°C) and the air temperature likewise. Plants are set out firmly, but not compacted. Regular watering is essential, avoiding sogginess around the plant stem.

Where training systems are involved, as opposed to 'sprawling', the leading shoot is tied to the support, which is then pinched to encourage side shoots. The number of these left is generally restricted, and each stem pinched out a couple of leaves beyond the female flowers. Sprawling plants are simply left to develop and restricted to avoid growth congestion as required.

Hand pollination is required, by inserting the male flower into the female flower. Around 5-8 fruits per plant can be expected. Top dressing with good compost when white roots are seen, regular watering, and liquid feeding, are the rules. Support is required with melon nets or other means, for the developing fruit. For sprawling plants, a layer of straw should be put down to prevent fruit damage.

Pests and diseases

Gummosis causes sunken areas in the fruits, exuding sticky gum. Cracking of fruit follows. Reduce the humidity, and spray with a suitable fungicide.

Powdery mildew may occur (white powdery 'dust' on the leaves). Spray as required.

Aphids, Red Spider Mite and Whitefly may all cause problems. Treat accordingly, following the manufacturers' guidelines, or use biological control if feasible.

Information provided for guidance only, as cultural practices and climatic circumstances vary.