

Melons

Summer wouldn't be the same without melons. With so many varieties available you will surely find one that appeals to you. Melons are members of the gourd family and cousins to cucumbers, pumpkins, and squashes. Let's look at the best known types first, watermelon and cantaloupe.

The watermelon originated from the Kalahari Desert of Africa and then made its way along the Mediterranean Sea. By the tenth century it was being grown in China. It is uncertain when the watermelon made its way to the United States, but some food historians maintain it came with the African slaves. Today the U.S. ranks fourth in countries growing watermelons. The peak production occurs in the summer months but watermelons can be purchased from April through November.

There are more than 50 varieties of watermelons grown in the U.S. They are usually round or oblong and can weigh as little as 5 pounds or as much as 30 pounds. They have a smooth, green rind that is not eaten. Most watermelons have red flesh but there are orange and yellow-flesh varieties. Most have seeds but some are seedless.

Selecting a watermelon is not difficult. Since they are 92% water, look for one that feels heavy for its size, free from bruises, cuts, or dents. A creamy yellow spot indicates the area where the watermelon was sitting on the ground and was ripening in the sun.

The cantaloupe we have in the United States is actually a muskmelon. The true cantaloupe exists in Europe and has a rough and warty surface unlike the netted characteristics found in the United States. For this article, however, we will use the common name-cantaloupe.

In the United States, cantaloupes are primarily grown in California, Arizona, and Texas with the peak season being June through August. However, the fruit is available year around in many grocery stores.

When shopping for a cantaloupe, choose one with a characteristic aroma at the stem end. The melon should have a spherical and uniform appearance without bruises and indentations. When ripe it should have a khaki colored skin, not green (although some new varieties retain a green-colored background when ripe.) There should be a smooth stem end without any signs of any tear. This indicates that the melon was not harvested too early.

A cantaloupe cannot further produce sugar once it is harvested. So leaving the melon on the counter at room temperature for a day or two will allow it to turn softer and juicier but not sweeter. Once ripe or cut, the melon should be refrigerated and consumed within two days.

Another popular melon is honeydew. This is the sweetest of all the melons and averages five to six pounds. Honeydew has a creamy yellow rind when ripe with pale green flesh. It's best from June through October, but is available year round.

Remember to always wash a melon before cutting. This is particularly important for melons, like cantaloupe, with a netted rind since it makes bacteria difficult to remove. For these fruits, use a vegetable brush to scrub the whole melon under running water.

Melons are low calorie foods, with 50 to 60 calories per cup, so they make a refreshing way to stay cool and hydrated on hot days.

While cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon are the most well-known varieties, you might look for additional melon varieties at your local supermarket or farmer's market for a different and tasty sweet treat. Here are a few unusual varieties you might like to try.

Casaba: Unlike the other melons, casaba melons do not have an aroma. This is a large melon that is pale yellow when ripe and has white flesh with a sweet taste. This melon peaks in the fall, but starts showing up in markets in July through December.

Persian: This melon is quite similar to the cantaloupe, but it is slightly larger in size, has a greener rind, and on the outside it has finer netting. Persian melons peak in August and September with the season beginning in June and ending November.

Crenshaw: These melons can weigh up to ten pounds and deliver a unique sweet and spicy flavor. They are a hybrid between the casaba and Persian melon with a yellowish skin and salmon colored flesh. Peak season for Crenshaw melons is August through September, with the season beginning in July and ending in October.

Santa Claus: This melon is also known as the Christmas melon because it peaks during the month of December. This variety is similar to the watermelon with the green and gold stripes, but is about a foot long and isn't as sweet as the other melons.

Sharlyn: This melon tastes like a cantaloupe and honeydew combined. Sharlyn melons are sweet with netted outer layer, greenish-orange rind, and white flesh.

Watermelon-Blueberry Banana Split

2 bananas

8 watermelon "scoops" (a watermelon ball created with an ice cream scoop)

2 cups blueberries

1/2 cups low-fat vanilla yogurt

1/4 cups low-fat granola

Peel bananas and cut in half crosswise. Cut each piece in half lengthwise. Lay 2 banana pieces against the sides of a shallow dish. Place a watermelon "scoop" at each end of the dish. Fill the center space with blueberries. Spoon yogurt over watermelon "scoops" and sprinkle with granola. Yield: 4 servings

Nutrition Information Per Serving; 160 calories; 1 g Total Fat; 40 mg Sodium; 38g total Carbohydrate; 4 g Dietary Fiber

Cantaloupe Fruit Salad

2 cantaloupe, rind and seeds removed

1 pineapple, cored, peeled, cut in small chunks

1 cups walnuts, finely chopped

1 apple, diced

4 cups vanilla low-fat yogurt

Cut cantaloupe into small chunks. Place in a large bowl. Add pineapple, walnuts, and apple to cantaloupe. Mix well. Spoon 1/2 cup yogurt into a bowl. Top with fruit. Stir to coat fruit. Yield: 8 servings

Nutrition Information per Serving: Calories 250, Total Fat 12g, Saturated Fat 2 g; Cholesterol 10 mg; Sodium 105 mg; Total Carbohydrate 30 g; Dietary Fiber 3 g

Watermelon Salad

1 large watermelon

1 cantaloupe

1 honeydew melon

1 pineapple

2 fresh peaches (or nectarines)

2 cups fresh blueberries (or other berries)

With melon ball cutter, cut balls from watermelon. Remove seeds and refrigerate.

Cut balls from cantaloupe and honeydew melons (about 3 cups of each). Remove rind and core from pineapple; cut into bite-sized pieces. Mix with cantaloupe and honeydew balls; cover and refrigerate.

Just before serving, peel and slice peaches. Rinse berries. Drain melon balls and pineapple chunks.

Combine all fruit in large bowl. If desired, toss with honey-lime sauce.

Honey-Lime Sauce (optional)

2 tablespoons lime juice

1/2 cup ginger ale

3 tablespoons honey

Combine ingredients. Pour over fruit and toss.

Honeydew Melon Soup

2 cups cubed cantaloupe
2 cups cubed honeydew
2 cups cubed watermelon (seedless or with seeds removed)
1/2 cup orange juice
3 Tablespoons lemon juice
2 tsp honey
1/2 cup fat-free half and half
Mint sprigs (optional)

Blend cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon, orange juice, lemon juice, and honey in food processor or blender until smooth. Stir in half and half. Refrigerate until chilled. Pour into individual bowls and garnish with mint (optional). Yield: 4 servings

Nutrition Information per serving: 130 calories, 1 g total fat, 30 g carbohydrate, 3 g protein, 2 g fiber, 75 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol.

Cantaloupe Salsa

1/2 large ripe cantaloupe
3/4 cup finely diced red bell pepper
1/4 cup finely chopped cilantro
3 Tablespoons finely chopped scallions
Juice from 1 lime
Pinch of Salt
Pinch of Hot Pepper Flakes

Remove seeds and rind from cantaloupe. Finely dice cantaloupe (pieces should be very small) and place in bowl. Add diced red pepper, cilantro, scallions, and lime juice. Stir. Add a pinch of salt and pepper flakes. Chill. Serve with vegetables, crackers, or over grilled chicken, fish, or steak.

Yield: 4 servings

Nutrition Information per serving: 45 calories; 11 g carbohydrate; 1 g protein, 2 g fiber, 90 mg sodium

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