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Cantaloupe, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

The smell of a ripe muskmelon is like nothing else. You pick it up, raise it to your nose, and inhale. A sweet, sometimes pungent spicy scent mixed with a bit of fresh green — the musk odor of muskmelons — is almost overwhelming. If it's a ripe heirloom melon, the scents are often more potent and complex. Whether at the supermarket, the farmers' market or in your backyard, you handle the fruit as if it's special, because it is. While melons are common and available year-round, they retain an aura of the exotic and mysterious.

Melons are a member of the wandering family, the Cucurbitaceae, otherwise known as the Squash or Gourd family, generally characterized by five parted flowers, often yellow or orange, and vines with tendrils. About 500 species of tropical or semi-tropical origin are found throughout history, from the Old and New World. Most members of this family are quick-growing tender annuals that require a lot of heat and warm soil to perform well. This is especially true of the melon group.

Origins

Melons belong to the genus *Cucumis*, consisting of 50 to 60 species in which a wide range of fruit types are cultivated for both ornament and food.

For many years, speculation has reigned as to where the melon originated. For a long time, it was thought that West Africa was the melon birthplace. Now, evidence points to several independent centers of origin in East Asia, India and Southeast Asia.

The melon species we are concerned with is *Cucumis melo*, subspecies *melo*, which contains seven groups with distinct fruit types, some of which do not resemble melons and of which about half are sweet.

One of the two most familiar melon groups is the *Reticulatus* group — the classic netted melon we call muskmelon or cantaloupe in the U.S., and the subject of this article. The *Reticulatus* group is sometimes lumped in with the *Cantalupensis* group, or true cantaloupe, except that this group is not netted and is rarely grown commercially in this country — it is most common in Cantaluppi, Italy, and across Europe. They are similar to netted muskmelons with smooth or warted rind and great flavor.

Sound Confusing? It can be.

In any case, the melon group is an ancient plant. It was known in Egypt and Greece around 2,000 B.C. Snake melons were the kind of melons most frequently cultivated at the time.

[Sweet melons](#) did not reach Europe until the early Renaissance. The proper identification of the sweet dessert melons has prompted disagreement throughout much of history because of

linguistic confusion and the similarity of seeds. So while Romans consumed a round melon for dessert, according to Pliny the Elder, it was not the sweet fruit we know today.

[Sweet melon varieties](#) were known in the 9th century in central Asia; the varieties traveled to Persia and then to Andalusia by the 11th century. Sweet melons diffused throughout Europe and, by the 16th century, were brought by the Spanish to the New World. By the early 17th century, Native Americans were cultivating melons.

In post-colonial America, Bernard McMahon's broadsheet catalog of 1802 mentions 13 varieties of melon, including Green Flesh Honeydew Melon, Japan Rock Melon and Scarlet-fleshed Rock Melon.

Growing Cantaloupe

While we might expect a rampant squash vine to produce prodigious fruit, it's a miracle every year to observe sweet orbs of melons forming on dainty vines.

To properly grow and mature, muskmelons need a long and preferably hot summer, as well as a good supply of moisture. Too much moisture, however, particularly as the fruit matures, can reduce the sugary taste and cause cracking or rot. In Zone 4 and colder, and in maritime regions, it can be difficult to ripen melons.

Melons prefer a friable soil that warms up quickly. They do well with compost, fertilizer and regular weekly waterings. In hot climates, they can be directly sown in the ground, and, if you have a shorter season, they need to be started indoors about six weeks before planting. Because of their delicate roots, seedlings need individual cells or containers. I plant two to three seeds per cell and thin to one or two plants. Be careful to not give a melon seedling too large a container, or the roots will not fill out in time for planting and the root ball could easily fall apart. One way of avoiding this issue is by planting in a container that can be placed directly in the soil like a peat or cow pot.

[When transplanting seedlings](#), be sure they are thoroughly watered. I plant my melons in black plastic mulched rows to ensure they will have hot conditions. Melons can be planted singly in rows or in hills containing two to three plants. In cooler climates, you can speed up growth by putting them under slitted row covers, high tunnels or grow fabric. Remove or pull back the coverings at some point to allow bees access to flowers for pollination.

[Heirloom varieties](#) of melons are more susceptible than modern hybrids to diseases such as powdery mildew. Their susceptibility depends on the climate and weather. However, I have rarely had this disease on my heirloom melons. Some hybrid melons and new varieties have been bred to bear earlier, which makes ripening in northern regions more likely.

Heirloom cantaloupe varieties

Several hundred types of melons were known by the 1930s in the U.S. Worldwide, the number of cultivars is in the thousands. Plenty of heirloom cantaloupes are still available through seed catalogs.

Green Nutmeg dates to the 18th century. It is a green-fleshed melon. A relatively small and early ripening melon, Green Nutmeg was at one time oblong, similar to the shape of a nutmeg, but today it is more rounded. Unlike modern melons, the flesh is soft and juicy, a trait typical of many heirlooms, with a heavenly fragrance.

Jenny Lind is a green-fleshed melon named after the famous singer known as “the Swedish Nightingale.” It was developed around 1846, probably derived from the Center Melon known around Philadelphia before 1840. Like the Green Nutmeg, the shape of the Jenny Lind melon evolved over time to today’s type, which is turban shaped with a prominent button on the blossom end. The fruit is small, weighing 1 to 2 pounds, and it has a mild flavor and aroma.

Another green-fleshed melon is Rocky Ford, developed from Burpee’s Netted Gem, which was introduced in 1886 in Colorado. First grown as a shipping melon, the Netted Gem became known as the Rocky Ford Melon — after Rocky Ford, Colorado, a famous melon-growing community — in 1895. Rocky Fords weigh 1 to 2 pounds, are relatively early with somewhat firm flesh, a flavorful spicy taste, and great aroma.

Oka is a cantaloupe developed in the early part of the 20th century at the Trappist Monastery in La Trappe, Quebec, and was introduced in the United States in 1924. It has soft orange flesh, a mild flavor and aroma, and is somewhat sweet. It does well in northern areas.

Another late-19th-century variety is Hearts of Gold, also known as the Hoodoo Melon, which is the result of crosses made between Osage and Netted Gem varieties around 1890. From one of these crosses, Roland Morill of Benton Harbor, Michigan, developed Hearts of Gold, patented in 1914. It soon became a popular variety in Michigan. Flavorful and aromatic, the plants produce 2- to 3-pound round netted fruits.

Hale’s Best is an orange-fleshed melon developed in the early 1920s when I.D. Hale discovered the variety being grown by a Japanese market farmer in California. Hale introduced it in 1924 as Hale’s Best or H.B. The flesh is smooth, flavorful and sweet with a mild aroma.

A longer-season melon introduced in 1937 by the Robert Buist Co. is Pride of Wisconsin; it is oblong with faint ribs and tasty, thick orange flesh. This is a classic Midwestern variety, and, if you have a hot season with good moisture, Pride of Wisconsin will do well.

To smell some amazing aromas and consume some delectable fruit, give heirloom melons a try. While some of them are showing up at farmers’ markets, if you really want to enjoy them, you’ll probably have to try growing cantaloupe yourself.