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Select the Best Melon for the 4th

It's watermelon season. When you live in a state (like S.C.) that has two watermelon festivals, you know we have our priorities in order. The Hampton County Watermelon Festival just finished last week. However, the S.C. Watermelon Festival will be held in Pageland on July 15-17. We southerners have taught the nation that it just ain't July 4th without a crisp, ripe, sweet watermelon. I get many questions on how to select a ripe or quality melon or fruit. Nothing is more disappointing than to gather, wait to cut, and then the melon is green or poor quality.

First of all, each type of melon or fruit have their own particular signs of ripeness and quality. Today hundreds of types of melons and fruit are available all year long. Remember that unless they are picked out of a garden or bought on the farm, most fruits and melons are harvested early to allow for shipping and handling. The earlier picked the less time for the fruit to get sugars from the plant.

Remember, all fruit and melons, except pears, do not improve in quality after harvest. Pears are better if harvested when firm and allowed to ripen. If harvested green watermelons flesh will turn red but will not be sweet. Most melons and fruits are better if allowed to ripen to maturity on the plant.

Next, look for the particular traits you like in a fruit or melon. Do you like firm or soft, sweet or tart, or large or small? The hot trend for watermelons today is small personal sized melons. I am amazed that there is a major market for green plums in S.C. People like them tart. To me a peach is not a peach unless it is soft enough to peel it with your fingers, but others like them firm.

Finally, here are some hints on how to pick a ripe quality melon. A watermelon is ripe when its belly turns from white to a cream or yellowish color, longitudinal (lengthwise) ridges can be felt on the upper surface, and (if harvesting) the curl (tendrils) next to the melon is dried-up. To determine the length of time since harvest, look at the stem-end and belly of a watermelon. If the stem is dried the melon has been harvested along time. However, many vendors will try to disguise the length of time a melon has been harvested by periodically clipping the stem. The belly of a watermelon is the bottom or part that rests on the ground. The belly will be white when the melon is green and will get as we say in the south "yellower" as the melon gets riper. If the belly is bright yellow the melon may be over ripe.

Cantaloupes are fully mature when the melon fully slips from the vine. In other words, none of the vine is left on the stem-end of the melon leaving a complete round scar when harvested. High quality cantaloupe fruit will also have a strong musky smell and a full net (the net-like ridges on the outside of the melon). Give me a call at 661-4800 if you want to know about other melons or fruits.

To learn the specifics on gardening we have both free and for-sale publications at our office in the back of the Public Services Building on the corner of Third Loop and Irby. You may also visit our Home & Garden Information Center through our web site at www.clemson.edu/florence. I may be contacted through our web site, amelton@clemson.edu, or 661-4800.

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