

Think, Thank, Thump Watermelons

Summer just would not be summer without the sweet, juicy taste of watermelon. Especially in Union Parish, being the home of the Louisiana Watermelon Festival. This year is no exception, but when will the sweet juicy taste be here? When will the melons be ripe? How do you know that the melon is ripe or at its peak maturity? These are the questions many people want to know. These are the questions, posed to many extension agents and watermelon growers through, out the South.

Determining maturity of watermelons is not easy.

Grocery stores strive to have the first melons in their store for consumers. Some grocery stores have melons for sale sometimes as early as May. Melons for sale in Louisiana as early as May in most cases were grown in South America or Mexico. Thereby some quality is sacrificed due to the shipping and/or extensive shelf life.

Louisiana-grown watermelons tend to mature about mid-June at the earliest. These melons are normally grown under excellent cultural practices and produce high quality as well as high sugar content.

How do we know that these melons are ripe? Perhaps the first thing someone may take into account in figuring if a melon is ripe is to look at the number of days to maturity for a particular variety. For instance, some varieties like the traditionally grown Jubilee watermelon mature in about 120 days depending on growing conditions. This variety would have to be planted March 1 to be ripe by July 4. Planting in the field March 1, growers assume the risk of late freeze or frost damage.

Days to maturity will vary somewhat with the variety, but respond more readily to the temperature when planted. A June-planted watermelon will mature in 75 to 80 days; and a March-planted melon will require 95 to 100 days to reach maturity. There are some varieties which mature in as few as 70 to 85 days. Summer Flavor 710, Starbrite, Stars N Stripes and Sugar Baby are varieties which mature within 85 days. Planting these varieties in mid-March under excellent cultural practices produces high quality melons by mid-June. Many growers start the seed of these plants in the greenhouse to avoid late freeze or frost damage. Plants are grown two weeks in the greenhouse and planted in the field in early April. Growers strive to produce melons prior to July 4. Melons ready for market prior to July 4 bring a better price in the market.

These 85-day melons are hybrids with higher sugar content than that of the traditional Jubilee variety. By taking into account the number of days to maturity, growers can forecast the maturity of their melons quite easily.

What about the consumer? How do they know an excellent watermelon by just looking or thumping them in the store? For starters, melons in Louisiana grocery stores in April, May; may not have that sweet, juicy taste of summer that you are looking for. Next week we will focus on the consumers and how they may know that a melon is just ripe.