

## **It's Time for Sweet Louisiana Watermelon**

It is watermelon festival week and of course, everyone is going to be looking for that sweet, juicy taste of summer time watermelon before the week is out. Many of you have purchased watermelon earlier this year perhaps as early as April or May however, you did not find that taste of summertime that you were looking for. April and May is just a bit early for Louisiana-grown watermelons, and the melons you found in the grocery store had been shipped in from somewhere further south than Louisiana and even the Texas border.

Louisiana-grown melons generally are mature at the earliest in June. Washington Parish, one of those southern most parishes in Louisiana grows a considerable amount of watermelon and they do have a parish wide watermelon festival. They have a growing season about two weeks earlier than here in Union, and in some cases they may have melons perhaps two weeks earlier than here in Union. When it comes to proving who has the best overall watermelon in interior quality they have to travel to the state watermelon festival held only here in Union parish and they have traveled here for years to compete.

The Interior Quality Competition of the Louisiana Watermelon Festival may be one of the most educational parts of the Louisiana Watermelon Festival. This competition is sponsored by the Farmerville Jaycees and the LSU AgCenter. This competition has grown over the years with a lot of high quality entries from the highly competitive spirited watermelon growers of Union Parish. The melons are not judged based on looks and taste alone. The sugar content is measured and recorded on each melon using a refractometer. A refractometer measures the sugar content or soluble solids from the juice of the watermelon; technically know as brix.

Harvesting watermelon may be a fun time for the family to play a guessing game, especially the first watermelon of the season. The first sign to look for in the home garden is the turning brown of the first curling tendril or curlicue from where the fruiting stem joins the vine. The melon is mature or close to maturity when the tendril becomes dry and brown. Many gardeners when harvesting, may use the brown tendril technique in combination with harvesting when the ground spot on the belly of the watermelon has turned yellow in color. This method assures a ripe watermelon without thumping. Cut the watermelon from the vine with a 2-to 3-inch stem. Always place the watermelon in a shaded area immediately after cutting to avoid sunscald.

Regardless if we are checking, maturity or not we just cannot cut a watermelon with out thumping it several times. This is an excellent method of checking maturity of watermelon in the grocery store. Thumping or patting the melon produces a pitch. A hollow sound produced when the watermelon is thumped or

patted indicates a ripe watermelon or in most cases, picking a baritone or bass sounding fruit assures maturity.

One last strategy an individual could try; although this is not scientific, is the old broom straw trick. Place your watermelon on a flat surface. Take a straight straw from an old long straw broom. Balance the broom straw across the watermelon. If the straw turns straight along with the melon, maturity is assured.

If you have questions regarding this or any other horticultural topic please feel free to call me Rafash Brew, your regional horticulture specialist at your local Extension office a branch of the LSU AgCenter at 318-368-9935.