

# What's in Season from the Garden State

Biweekly Highlights from Cooperative Extension, a unit of Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

July 21, 2008



*Eastern cantaloupes grown for local markets.  
Photo courtesy of NJ Department of Agriculture*



*A cross between a Central Asian melon and North American melon is evaluated for disease resistance in a variety trial at Rutgers NJAES research farm.*

## **Harvest History Tidbit**

*"In Burlington County the season was favorable for the growth of melons, and the growers realized good prices. In some instances men were able to buy farms with the proceeds of their melon crop."- A prosperous year in the two great agricultural counties of the state – reports from all parts of the commonwealth, New York Times, February 2, 1891*

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New Jersey Agricultural  
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## **Muskmelon or Cantaloupe; Melons or "Lopes"**

*Jack Rabin, Associate Director for Farm Services, Rutgers NJAES*

Whatever your favorite name for the wonderful variety of aromatic sweet fresh summer melons from the species *Cucumis melo* L., midsummer is their peak; the only time of year you are likely to find them with their hallmark musky, spicy-sweet aromas and tastes.

### **What's different between Eastern and West or Southwest Shipping melons?**

Traditionally, Eastern melons grown for local market shipping and farm markets tended to have identifiable characteristics like prominent, wide, and deep "ribs" and heavy coarse "netting." The fruit sizes are larger (3 1/2 to 6 lbs.) with an oval elongated to round shape. The thick fine-textured flesh is a beautiful salmon-orange color around a moist seed cavity. The melons have a pleasing distinctive "musky" spicy sweet aroma and a sweet taste.

Western longer season melons for long distance shipping tend to smaller sizes (2 1/2 to 3 1/2 lbs.) and rounder shapes. The flesh, while also thick and sweet, is very firm and the seed cavity tends to be drier. Their ribs are less distinct, with finer more uniform netting and a hard rind. They can be very sweet, but since they are rarely harvested at full-slip maturity, most folks do not know how they really taste in comparison to Eastern melon types.

That was then. Today's melon fan will find a wider variety of local melons at markets: from small sweet greenish/yellow-tinted "Galia" Israeli developed melons to elongated smooth golden skinned Asian melons and the Ananas melons. Most smooth Crenshaw, Honeydew, and Canary melons are still shipped from arid growing regions, and consumers will need to ask if they are local.

### **Are delicious cantaloupe experiences proportional to researchers and farmers' challenges?**

If melons are so delicious, why don't more New Jersey vegetable farmers grow them? Because melon growing has never been easy, certainly not without Rutgers NJAES field research and extension solving farmers' problems. Each melon variety is a little different in its growing requirements. Farmers locally in New Jersey, regionally, and worldwide, struggle against a destructive variety of melon fungal diseases with odd names like Powdery Mildew, Downy Mildew, and Fusarium Races 1 & 2. Farmers named one complex disease "Sudden Wilt" because it shows up suddenly—destroying farmers' whole mature fields just as harvest begins. While it is true melons grown in the arid West and Southwest USA are less plagued by these

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New Jersey Department of  
Agriculture's Jersey Fresh &  
Seafood Availability Report

- |                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Arugula        | Parsley         |
| Baby Arugula & | Peaches         |
| Baby Spinach   | Peppers         |
| Basil          | Pickles         |
| Beets          | Potatoes        |
| Blueberries    | Squash - yellow |
| Cabbage        | and zucchini    |
| Cantaloupes    | Sweet corn      |
| Collards       | Tomatoes        |
| Cucumbers      | Turnips         |



- |                |                            |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| Butterfish     | <b>Farm Raised Hard</b>    |
| Flounder       | <b>Clams &amp; Oysters</b> |
| Ling           | Little-necks/Middle-       |
| Lobster        | necks                      |
| Scup (Porgies) | Cherrystones,              |
| Sea Scallops   | Chowders, Top-             |
| (Day Boat)     | necks                      |
| Squid          | Cape May Salt Half-        |
| Sword Fish     | Shelled Oysters            |
| Tuna           | Delaware Bay Oys-          |
| Whiting        | ters                       |



challenges, they can't be picked at their full aromatic sweet maturity and withstand the rigors of shipping. So, we eat them, but miss the experience. Some of the earliest and best advances made improving melon varieties was long ago incorporating disease resistance found in melons from the Asian continent into today's muskmelon and cantaloupe varieties. Farmers gladly pay up to \$0.15 per seed for the best improved hybrid varieties.

Melons are a long season crop. Their earliest maturity begins about 70-80 days from seeding, and the longer the vines grow, the more opportunity for destructive pests to find the crop. Just as we are attracted to the aromas and sweetness, insect pests are no different. Controlling insects which spread fungal and bacterial diseases to the vines has always been a priority of Rutgers NJAES researchers.

Netted fully ripe melons maintain their maximum sweet taste quality and shelf life when stored chilled to near freezing, about 32-36°F. Melons a little less ripe are best stored less cold, about 36-40°F.

### Harvesting Melons at Peak Flavor

*Excerpted from Factsheet FS610 by Rick Van Vranken, Agricultural Agent, Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County*  
<http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS610>

Melons taste is attributed to the combination of flavor, texture, and sweetness. Sugars are pumped into the fruit from the leaves as the fruit matures. Once harvested, the fruit receives no more sugar, though changes in flavor and texture will continue. Therefore, it is better to leave melons on the vine as long as possible, so they can reach peak sweetness and the best taste.

### Cantaloupes (Muskmelons)

When cantaloupes are beginning to ripen they will turn color, from a dull grayish green to a buff-yellow. Cantaloupes also develop a netting over the skin as they mature.

Cantaloupes are harvested by the degree of "slip," or ease of detachment from the vine. A melon at full-slip is one that is fully mature and at peak flavor. At full-slip, the cantaloupe will detach easily from the vine, leaving a clean stem scar.

"Locally Grown" melons are usually harvested at full-slip, which is why they usually taste better than melons shipped in from other production areas. Those melons are harvested at quarter or half-slip, which means part of the stem detached from the fruit, but part remains. Although not at full maturity or peak sugar content, these melons are firmer and remain in good condition when shipped long distances. Full-slip melons are softer and do not ship well.

In the home garden, there is no reason to rush cantaloupe harvest. Wait for them to reach full-slip.

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