

This year, Ludlom is growing Palomar, a seedless melon with bright red, crispy flesh, and Jade Star, a juicy, round variety with a dark green rind. But his favorite seedless is Ruby, a melon with a sweet, crispy bite that typically grows 10 to 14 pounds.

“Everybody can grow watermelons,” Ludlom says. “I’ve never had a failure with them. They’re the most disease and bug resistant of any plant you’ll plant.” He starts his seeds in a hothouse in late February, and waits until the weather is reliably warm to transplant the seedlings.

Brent Jackson, a large-scale grower who owns Jackson Farming, near Fayetteville, N.C., says his watermelons grow best in well-drained, sandy loam soils. Since they dislike water standing in the fields, Jackson uses a plastic drip irrigation system to deliver a drink to the plants, adding liquid fertilizer in moderate amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, as needed. Taking weekly tissue samples of the growing watermelons allows him to determine exactly what they need.

Ludlom depends on experience to grow his melons. He prefers to broadcast 14-7-14 fertilizer between the rows and let the plants’ roots “grow to it,” although, like Jackson, he also waters with drip tubing placed underneath sheets of plastic on his beds. The plastic helps warm the soil faster in early spring, and cuts down on the growth of grass and weeds, so the garden doesn’t require as much hoeing.

When it’s time to harvest, Ludlom uses his four-wheel-drive Massey Ferguson 1250 tractor to haul the watermelons out of the field. The trick is knowing when they’re ready. While some folks swear by tapping a melon and listening for a dull thump, Ludlom says it’s better to “roll him over and see his belly.”

A creamy white patch on the underside means it’s time to pick, but it’s better to cut a watermelon from its vine, rather than pull it. Pulling can crack the rind and let pathogens in, which makes the melon deteriorate faster.

Both farmers agree: Weather can be a watermelon’s worst foe. Jackson fears hailstorms: “Even if a melon is the size of a quarter, hail makes an indentation that never grows out.

It’s an appearance thing, but that’s what sells the melons.” Ludlom worries about the flooding that hurricanes can bring, although he’s been lucky so far.

So what’s Ludlom’s favorite? He chuckles and admits he likes a good cantaloupe for variety, but says Sweet Princess, a 30-pounder with sweet, deep pink flesh, is the best melon he’s ever put in his mouth. “I’ve got to say, I’ve been successful with watermelons,” says Ludlom. ■



Tri-X
Brand Palomar



Benny Ludlom buys his Massey Ferguson equipment from Charles White, White Tractor Company, in Burgaw, N.C.



Lynn Coulter is the author of *Gardening with Heirloom Seeds: Tried-and-True Flowers, Fruits & Vegetables for a New Generation*. Find it online at www.amazon.com.

FIVE FUN THINGS TO DO WITH WATERMELONS

1 Grease a melon with shortening and toss it in the lake (not a pool—too messy). First one to wrestle it to shore wins. Tip: protect your face. Slippery, bobbing melons are rough on the nose and teeth.

2 Slice a melon into 1/2” thick rounds and let the kids make shapes with cookie cutters.

3 Carve a melon into a basket and fill it with grapes, strawberries and pineapple chunks for a buffet.

4 Make watermelon granita-filled lime cups (see our recipe on page 27).

5 Puree a seedless watermelon and freeze it into cubes for summer drinks.

DID YOU KNOW?

Watermelons contain glutathione, which may help with sinus problems. They also contain no fat or cholesterol, are low in sodium, and are a good source of Vitamin C and lycopene, a powerful antioxidant.



MOON AND STARS

This is an heirloom watermelon, so its seeds grow true to type. The name comes from the “moon,” the large yellow blotch, and “stars,” the yellow freckles, on its dark rind. The flesh is sugary sweet.



RATTLESNAKE

A Southern heirloom, this old variety has dark green “rattlesnake” markings over a lighter green rind. It grows long and narrow, has a sweet meat, and averages 25 to 45 pounds at harvest.