

Rockmelon

(*Cucumis melo*)

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Rockmelons can be planted any time of the year in the Top End, though fruit produced in the Dry is superior. It is advisable to plant out on ridges 30-40 cm high during the Wet to minimise the chances of waterlogging. Seeds are planted no deeper than 2.5 cm in groups of 3-4 every 60 cm if grown on the ground or every 30 cm if trellised. Plants are thinned out when they reach the 2 leaf stage. Male and female flowers are produced separately; the first flowers to form are always male. Female flowers are identified by the small fruit forming behind the petals when they open. When fruit has formed place a handful of straw under it and turn it slightly periodically. This prevents blemishes which may eventually cause decay or breakdown of the fruit.



FERTILISER

The area should be limed at least 2-3 weeks before planting using dolomite at the rate of 200-250 g/m².

Compost or well rotted manure is beneficial if dug into the soil at a rate of 2 kg/m². Each planting station should receive 70 gm of a complete fertiliser mix containing medium amounts of nitrogen and potassium and a high phosphate level; and an extra 4 g/plant of potash will improve fruit quality. When the runners are 35-40 cm long a side dressing of 30 g of a 50:50 mixture of urea and mutriate of potash fertiliser is given. This should be repeated at 10-14 days intervals until fruit are nearing maturity i.e. full size. Care should be taken not to over fertilise with nitrogen as this can lead to hollow fruit as well as lush plants which suffer from severe wilting during the heat of the day.

WATERING

Frequent watering is necessary during hot dry weather. Drippers are ideal for this purpose. It has been found that mature plants benefit from irrigation applied at the hottest part of the day i.e. between 1.00 p.m. - 3.00 p.m.

HARVESTING

The first fruits will be ready in about 10-12 weeks after planting. The fruits are fully mature when they reach "full slip stage". This occurs when the stem parts from the fruit leaving a circular depression.

INSECTS

One ladybird and two pumpkin beetles are the main pests. They are all leaf eaters and cause considerable defoliation, but can be controlled by spraying with carbaryl at the rate recommended by the manufacturer. After flowering begins carbaryl should not be used, instead endosulfan (Thiodan[®]) which is less harmful to bees can be used.

DISEASES

Cucurbit crops in the Top End are frequently attacked by mildew diseases which, if allowed to continue unchecked, can lead to crop failure. Attacks are often worse in the Wet but occur also in irrigated crops during the Dry. There are 2 main types of mildew.

Downy Mildew

Rockmelons and cucumber are mainly attacked by this disease. The symptoms are pale yellow-green spots on the top surface of leaves. These enlarge to 1 cm across and are angular in shape, becoming yellow to brown on top and gray and slightly downy underneath, due to the masses of spores which spread the disease. Infected leaves wither and die, vines become defoliated, fruit set ceases and existing fruits are exposed to sunburn. Control is achieved by spraying the leaves ensuring complete coverage with Mancozeb[®] or Dithane M45[®] at the recommended rates on the container. Spraying should commence at the first sign of infection and continue at weekly intervals thereafter.

Powdery Mildew

Rockmelons and cucumbers are often, attacked by this disease in cool dry weather. Symptoms are circular powdery white spots on older leaves and stems. These spread over the whole leaf resulting in crop loss or considerable reduction in yield. A couple of sprays with Bayleton[®], Rubigan[®], or Milcurb[®] will control powdery mildew if applied when the disease is observed.

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