

Growing Rockmelons Around Alice Springs

Horticulture Division, Alice Springs

VARIETIES

The best varieties for Alice Springs are Hybrid Topscore and Planters Jumbo. Hales Best 45 (or PMR 45) is probably the most readily available and is also a good home garden variety. Some varieties such as Early Dawn and Earli Rok have the advantage of early production, while Honey Dew is a popular green-fleshed variety.

Most varieties have netted skin with salmon pink flesh and are mature when the stalk is breaking away (slipping) from the melon. Maturity times vary from around 90 days for early varieties to over 100 days for later varieties. Honey Dew has a smooth skin, a pale green flesh and the stalk stays firmly attached at maturity. It is mature when the skin is creamy white, the melon has a pronounced honey dew aroma, the blossom end is springy to touch and the skin has a waxy appearance. It matures in about 120 to 140 days.



SOIL PREPARATION

The soil should be dug deeply and any available compost or animal manure incorporated. If the availability of compost or animal manure is limited it can be incorporated in hills about 50 cm apart within the row with 1 metre between rows. Sometimes the planting positions are raised hence the name hills; this is not necessary in Alice Springs. Hilling is sometimes useful where basin watering is used.

FERTILISER

A mixture of 100 g of Complete D[®] and 150 g of superphosphate/m², or 50 g of Complete D[®] plus 75 g of superphosphate per hill should be applied at sowing. As the runners extend during the season an application of 15 g of sulphate of ammonia or 7 g of urea per hill can be side dressed. This can be repeated at first fruit set.

PLANTING

Seed can be sown once the danger of frost is over, usually from September through to January. Four seeds can be sown in clumps 50 cm apart with 1 m between rows. Seedlings should be later thinned to one vigorous plant per position. Seed should be sown 2 cm deep. The seed-bed should be moist at sowing time and the sown area watered again in two or three days.

WATERING

Watering requirement varies from about 8 mm (or 8 L/m²) every second day for early sown crops to 70 mm per week for melons in full growth during summer. All types of irrigation are suitable for rockmelons. Drip irrigation will use less water if it is managed correctly.

Rockmelons have a low salt tolerance. However water of up to 500 mg/L T.D.S. is suitable for spray irrigation if watering is not done during hot dry days. Flood, furrow, basin and drip irrigation can be used with water of 500 to 1,000 mg/L T.D.S. as long as drainage is good.

In very hot weather watering should be done in the evening or night.

MANAGEMENT

Mulching between plants is strongly recommended. The area should be kept weed free and insect pests and diseases should be controlled. Rockmelons can be trellised in a similar fashion to cucumbers.

Separate male and female flowers are borne on each plant, with usually a predominance of male flowers in the early flowering stage. Female flowers are distinguished by the bulbous embryo melon at the base of the flower.

Sometimes it is necessary to hand pollinate to get a satisfactory production. This is done by picking male flowers, removing the petals and dabbing the pollen-filled stamens into recently opened female flowers. Early morning is the best time for pollinating. The frequent use of insecticides in the home garden reduces the insect population that is responsible for pollination of some plants.

INSECT CONTROL

Leaf eating ladybird and pumpkin beetle are the major insect pests of rockmelons in the Alice Springs District. They eat leaf tissues, leaving a window effect. These can be controlled with trichlorfon or carbaryl at the recommended rates. Twospotted mite can also be a serious pest. It can be controlled with Kelthane[®] spray, directed mainly at the underside of the leaves.

DISEASE CONTROL

Plants can be dusted with flowers of sulphur, or sprayed with Benlate® to control powdery mildew. The symptoms of this are circular powdery white to grey spots on older leaves and stems. The infection soon spreads throughout the plant. Hales Best (PMT 45) is resistant to powders mildew; however other varieties may be attacked.

HARVESTING

The netted pink-flesh types that slip (separation of the stalk from the melon) from the vine when mature should be picked at full slip, as they will deteriorate in quality after this stage. To be safe they can be picked at the first sign of slipping, when they are very firm.

The Honey Dew and some other Casaba types do not slip when ripe. These will hold for a little time on the vine when fully mature.

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