

*Citrullus lanatus*

[Synonyms : *Citrullus caffer*, *Citrullus citrullus*, *Citrullus colocynthis* var. *lanatus*, *Citrullus edulis*, *Citrullus vulgaris*, *Colocynthis amarissima*, *Colocynthis citrullus*, *Cucumis citrullus*, *Cucumis colocynthis*, *Cucumis lacinosus*, *Cucurbita angura*, *Cucurbita caffra*, *Cucurbita citrullus*, *Momordica lanata*]

**WATER MELON** is a creeping vine. Probably native to tropical Africa it has greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Anguria* (Italian), *Badea* (Spanish), *Battikh* (Arabic), *Citrolo ordinara* (Esperanto), *Cocomero* (Italian), Cold seeds, *Dyňa červená* (Slovak), *Komadu* (Singhalese), *Lubenice obečná* (Czech), *Melancia* (Portuguese), *Melon d'eau* (French), *Mendikai* (Malay), *Melon dlo* (Creole), *Pastèque* (French), *Peni-komadu* (Singhalese), *Pitcha* (Tamil), *Saka thide* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), *Saka yutapi* (Dakota North American Indian), *Sandia* (Spanish), *Samangka* (Sundanese), *Semongka* (Javanese), *Taeng-ma* (Thai), *Tarabuuja* (Nepalese), *Tarambuja* (Sanskrit), *Tarbuch* (Gujarati), *Tarbutz* (Hindi), *Tarmuz* (Bengali), *Tembikai* (Malay), Tsamma melon, *Vattenmelon* (Swedish), *Vesimeloni* (Finnish), *Vodní meloun* (Czech), *Wassermelone* (German), *Wathaka ratdshe* (Oto North American Indian), *Wilde Wassermelone* (German), Wild melon, and Wild watermelon; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bulkiness.

The fruit is made up of 91% water, 8% carbohydrate and low calories. Today these can weigh up to 55 lb. - and some varieties can even reach as much as 99 lb.

Oil is extracted from the seeds.

*Lanatus* is Latin (woolly, wool-bearing).

The origins of the water melon are uncertain but it is believed likely that it is native to Africa. (Although authorities now suspect that the water melon may have been developed from its close relative, the bitter apple, as a cultivated plant.) The large, rounded fruit have long provided a vital source of moisture for some of the groups of Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert, and the Scottish missionary and traveller, David Livingstone (1813-1873) is reported as having come across acres of them, apparently growing in the wild there, during his travels in the 1850s.

The often white-streaked or mottled, light or dark green fruit are also eaten by the larger animals that can penetrate the hard skin, and by rodents that gnaw their way through it.

Authorities note that it was naturalized in the Middle East and Russia before recorded history. Both its seeds and illustrations in murals have been found in Egyptian tombs dating back to at least 2500 BC, and there is a Sanskrit word for it that dates back to about 1000 BC. Water melons were known to the Greeks from about 5 BC, and to the Romans as well when they began to import them from Egypt.

Following the fall of the Roman Empire and the Moorish invasion of Spain and southern France in 711 AD, water melons arrived in western Europe. They were certainly to be found in China by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century as the Chinese were cultivating them by then. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the African Negro slaves took it (together with okra, *Abelmoschus esculentus* and black-eyed pea seeds) to the New World. It is understood to have reached England by 1597.

For both the Chinese and the Indians the oily seeds have long been eaten, dried, as peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*) are today. In Africa the seed oil has been used as a cheaper alternative to groundnut oil.

First known records of the water melon's successful cultivation in North America are in Massachusetts in 1629, and in due time all three plants which accompanied the Negroes from their African homelands (water melon, okra, black-eyed peas) became firmly established on the North American Continent. Water melons came to be known by many of the North American Indian tribes, including the Cheyenne, Hopi, Apalachee, Ponca, Pawnee, Omaha, Dakota and Oto. Towards the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Kiowa elders were relating how their ancestors saw water melon for the first time when they initially settled on an Oklahoma reservation. These 'new' fruit, which happened then to be unripe, were among produce stolen from local farmers' fields – and because of their unfamiliarity were eaten immediately. According to the elders many of the tribe were extremely ill and some even died as a result of their illicit feast. Apparently for many years afterwards the Kiowa shunned water melon as a poisonous fruit.

To this day water melons are associated particularly with the American 'Deep South'. Perhaps debate in the 1980s and 1990s on the meaning of 'soul food' in the North American South would be resolved more easily if okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), black-eyed peas and water melon were a significant feature of 'soul food' menus. Somebody writing in 1770 is said to have declared that New Jersey farm labourers ate water melons from the fields

at any time of day as laborers in England would drink ale or small beer.

In some countries the unripe green fruit are harvested and cooked like marrow (*Cucurbita pepo medullosa*). When there is a glut the unmarketable fruit are cut and left in the fields in some areas to provide a food supply for the bees.

Although these fruit have little nutritional value they are a remarkable thirst quencher that are especially prized in arid regions. One example of the application of this virtue is the practice in Mediterranean areas of selling slices of water melon on the streets, as corn (*Zea*), hot dogs, or chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*) might be sold in cooler climates.

In Africa the seeds are boiled and added to soups.

The pulp is a commercial ingredient used today by the cosmetics industry as an ingredient in face masks.