

*Cucumis melo*

[Synonyms : *Cucumis cognatus*, *Cucumis flexuosus*, *Cucumis melo* var. *agrestis*, *Cucumis melo* var. *cantaloupensis*, *Cucumis melo* var. *cultus*, *Cucumis odoratissimus*, *Cucurbita melo*]

**MELON** (English, French, Swedish) is a trailing annual vine. Possibly native to West Africa it has yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Agur* (Arabic), *‘Atiu* (Samoan, Tongan), *Batikh* (Arabic), *Blewek* (Javanese), *Cantaloupe*, *Common melon*, *Khar-beezah* (Persian), *Kharbooza* (Urdu), *Kharbuja* (Hindi, Sanskrit), *Kharbujadosa* (Telugu), *Kharmuj* (Bengali), *Melão* (Portuguese), *Melón* (Spanish), *Melon de France* (French), *Melone* (German, Italian), *Meloni* (Finnish), *Mulampasham* (Tamil), *Pitti-kekiri* (Singhalese), *Popone* (Italian), *Qâwûn kantâlûbî* (Arabic), *Smellmelon*, *Teng kai* (Thai), and *Weed melon*.

The ‘female’ melon (most sought after) carries a slightly different coloured circular area on the end opposite the stalk, reminiscent of the iris of an eye.

*Melo* is Latin (apple-shaped melon).

Although it is likely that the melon is a native of Iran, one of the first known records is said to be the reference of 3 BC made to the fruit in the epic of Gilgamesh, a legendary king of Sumeria. Also in the Old Testament of the *Bible* it is reported that together with cucumbers (*Cucumis sativus*) and fish the Hebrews yearned for melons when they were wandering in the desert after they had left Egypt. But authorities suspect these ‘melons’ were probably in the form of a hairy cucumber, an uncultivated variety common in Egypt and Arabia at that time.

The melon was cultivated by the ancient Egyptians and imported by the Greeks from about 5 BC. The fruit (which can vary in size, shape and colour) were first seen in the area around Naples in Italy in about 1 AD – and, once it had reached Rome, melon is said to have appeared on the table at virtually every meal eaten by Emperor Tiberius (42 BC-37 AD). Much later a British scholar from what is now Northumbria, Alcuin (c.737-804), also known as Albinus, who was an adviser in Rome to the Emperor Charlemagne (747-814), is credited with eating ten melons (which would then have been equivalent to 4 lb. of them in weight) as a first course. For about two centuries from its arrival in Italy, melons were a more and more inaccessible luxury as their price soared. By the time Emperor Diocletian 245-313) had taken control in 284, their cost had reached an extortionate level and he issued a decree to regulate this – but melons still continued to be, effectively, an imperial luxury. The Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79), wrote about them and the noted Greek physician, Claudius Galenus or Galen (c.130-c.201), did so too in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Century saw a description of how to grow the fruit included in a Roman gardening manual and over the centuries that followed melons were grown in Mediterranean countries and developed further, particularly by the Christian monks.

Marco Polo (1254-1324) refers to the melon in descriptions of his travels. In China, where he came across them, they would have been familiar since at least 1000 BC. He wrote that Shibarghan in Afghanistan

had the best melons in the world in very great quantity.

Melon probably arrived in France at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century from Italy with Charles VIII (1470-1498), when he returned from Cantalupo (a papal estate near Rome). Henri IV (1553-1610) of France was known for his love of the fruit which he took as refreshment after hunting. Authorities claim that the melon was being cultivated in France by 1629, and by the time the Sun King Louis XIV (1638-1715) came to the throne he was able to enjoy several varieties perfected in the gardens of Versailles. About 100 years later Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), the celebrated French novelist and playwright, is understood to have gone so far as to offer all his existing and future published works to the municipal council of Cavaillon in return for  
a life annuity of twelve melons per year.

The plant is believed to have been introduced to England in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

At some point melon turned up in the Americas – according to some authorities seeds accompanied Christopher Columbus ((1451-1506) the Genoese explorer, on his second voyage in 1493 when he landed in Haiti. The North American Hopi Indians made a ceremonial body paint with the seeds, and fresh fruit that they did not eat were generally preserved (de-rinded and the flesh dried in wrapped bundles for later use). Melon was also eaten by many other tribes, including the Thompson, Okanagan-Colville and Seminole Indians. Apparently the Keresan flavoured rabbit stews with the ground seeds – and apart from eating it as a boiled or fried vegetable, using it as an ingredient in corn bread or drying it for future food, the Iroquois Indians also ate it during ceremonial feasts.

An old superstition claimed that melons caused fever in the Autumn. Another perhaps more credible piece of country lore holds that melons should never be grown near pumpkins (*Cucurbita moschata*) or squashes (*Cucurbita maxima*) for fear of cross pollination.

Medicinally, herbalists used to prescribe an emulsion made from melon seeds for treating bowel and urinary disorders, fever and catarrh. The Russians have also used them to treat fluid retention, while in India the fruit pulp has offered a remedy for chronic eczema.