

WATERMELONS IN ARIZONA

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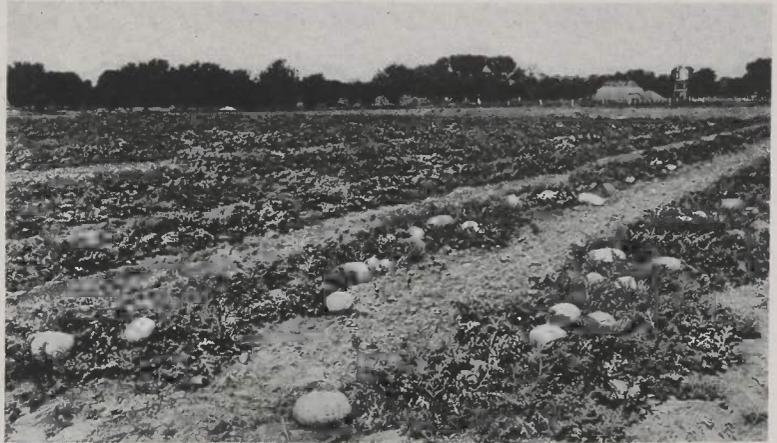
Southern Arizona Suitable for Commercial Plantings—Markets Available for Commercial Planting—High Quality Melons Necessary for a Good Margin of Profit.

CLIMATIC conditions in Southern Arizona favor the growth of early watermelons on a commercial scale. The melons can be marketed early enough to obtain fancy prices until other competing sections start shipping, at which time Arizona's shipments should be over. There must be a high yield with a relative low cost of production to show a good margin of profit. Therefore the most efficient methods of culture must be followed to produce a large crop of high quality melons, and reduce the cost of production.

The ideal watermelon soil is a sandy loam that is deep, well drained, free from alkali, and relatively high in fertility and organic matter. Old alfalfa land is the most desirable as it is high in plant food. More than two crops of melons in succession are not advisable, as a third crop is usually damaged by diseases and insect pests. If old alfalfa land is not available 10-20 tons of barnyard manure can be applied to each acre and plowed under before preparing the seed bed.

In preparing the seed bed the soil should be irrigated thoroughly so that the first four feet are well filled with moisture. When the surface soil has dried sufficiently to work well, it should be plowed to a depth of 6-8 inches and worked down to a fine, loose seed bed with a disc or harrow. The beds can be formed with a disc plow leaving a large furrow between for irrigation. The beds should be 8-10 feet wide depending on the richness of the soil. A wider bed is necessary for rich soil, as they produce more vine growth.

The seeds should be planted just above the water line. The water line is established by filling the furrows with water. Small beds 8-10 inches in diameter should be hoed out just above the water line, on the shoulder of the furrow. Ten to twelve seeds are planted at a depth of two inches in this bed. Hills are spaced from 6-8 feet apart in the row. If planted early the hills can be protected from frosts by waxed or glassine paper covers. These funnel-shaped covers are placed over wire wickets and held in place by the soil around the edges. By using the covers the crop can be



Early watermelons are a valuable crop for the Arizona truck farmer.

planted several weeks earlier. Where an earlier crop is desired it is well worth the extra cost. Where covers are not used the seeds can be planted 1-2 weeks prior to the normal date of the last killing frost.

When the young plants have developed to from 3-6 inches in height the hills should be thinned to 2 or 3 vines. Where covers are used the thinning can be done after the danger of frost is over and the covers are removed.

Cultivations should be shallow and frequent to keep down weeds and to prevent the surface soil from baking and becoming hard and cloddy. As soon as the vines interfere with cultivations they should be laid back on the bed prior to each cultivation. This can be done by hand with a long stick until blossoming time. After this little cultivation is given, although the vines should be removed from the furrows when irrigating.

Watermelons should be irrigated slowly to allow proper penetration and to prevent flooding the beds. The melons should be irrigated just prior to and shortly after seeding. The next two irrigations are withheld until the vines clearly show need of water. From this time until harvest irrigations should be frequent enough to keep the vines in a fast growing condition. Water is sometimes withheld just before the ripening as it is claimed this improves the flavor and toughens the rind.

Thinning is in many cases practiced

to insure well-sized and properly shaped melons. This not only improves the crop but brings most of it off in two or three pickings. Thinning should be done when most of the melons have attained a diameter of from 2-4 inches. Two to four of the best melons are left on each vine and the balance are removed by cutting them carefully from the runners. The melons left should be well shaped near the same size, and well distributed so that not more than one melon will be on a single runner.

The only reliable method of knowing just when watermelons are ripe is experience. "Thumping" gives some indication of the relative maturity, as a green melon will give a metallic "plunk" and a ripe one a dull "plunk." This method should be used when the melons are cool. Drying up of the tendrils at the point of attachment of the melon and the vine is another indication of maturity. Melons are more resistant to bruising and breakage when cool and should be harvested and handled only then. Two inches of stem should be left on melon when cut from the vine.

The best varieties for Arizona's soil and climate conditions are the Klondike, Kleckly Sweet, Angeleno, Chilean, and Irish Grey. Several other varieties suited for growing under Arizona's conditions are the Excel, Radio, Rattlesnake, Tom Watson, and Ice Cream, but they are not recommended for commercial plantings as they are not of high market favor,