

Did You Know?



July is National Watermelon Month, but most people don't know that watermelons have been brought to you by ARS research.

In 1954, Charles Fredric Andrus, with ARS's U.S. Vegetable Laboratory in Charleston, SC, developed what is considered today

the classic watermelon variety—the Charleston Grey. The Charleston Grey—which has great flavor, an oblong shape and hard rind that make it easy to stack and ship and, even more importantly, extensive disease resistance—is in the pedigree of 95 percent of the watermelons grown around the world.

Watermelons originated in Africa around the Kalahari Desert. They have been grown in this country as early as 1629.

But when geneticist Amnon Levi, who leads the watermelon program at ARS's U.S. Vegetable Laboratory, did a DNA analysis of watermelon varieties, he found that all of them are just about genetically identical, making them vulnerable to a single disease or pest. To broaden the gene pool, ARS researchers are going back to wild watermelon relatives in Africa to find genes for resistance to problems like watermelon vine decline, root-knot nematode, and Zucchini yellow mosaic virus.

Other research that ARS has under way includes trying to graft watermelon vines onto rootstocks that are more resistant to diseases and pests. ARS researchers are also working on ways to speed up production so that farmers can go from flowering to market-ready fruit in only 5 weeks.

Thumping a watermelon for ripeness is an old wives' tale that claims that the deeper and heavier the thump, the riper the fruit. But that thud can also indicate an overripe, mushy-centered melon.

The rind of the Charleston Grey is glossy before the watermelon ripens, and it turns matte when the watermelon is ready to eat. Also, where the watermelon rests on the soil, there is usually a light green to white "bald spot." When this bald spot changes to pale yellow or cream, the melon is ripe.

Watermelons are about 6 percent sugar and 91 percent water. They are usually a good source of vitamins A and C and lycopene.

Watermelon Fire & Ice Salsa

3 C. de-seeded and chopped watermelon

1/2 C. diced green peppers

2 Tbsp. lime juice

1 Tbsp. diced cilantro

1 Tbsp. diced green onion

1-2 Tbsp. diced jalapeño peppers

Combine ingredients, mix well, and cover. Refrigerate an hour or more. Serve with chips or as garnish for chicken or fish.

Recipe courtesy of the [National Watermelon Promotion Board](#).

Written by **Kim Kaplan**, ARS Information Staff.

Executive Editor

Sandy Miller Hays

Managing Editor

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Contributors

Sean Adams

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Tracy Havermann

Kim Kaplan

Ed Knipling

Donna Marshall