

Anyone Growing Ancient Watermelons?

by Al Chomica



Sixty years later, I can vividly recall my first watermelon. I was a young child. It was on a scorching hot day at a farm picnic and baseball game. My aunt had fainted from heat exhaustion and I thought she was dead. I stood there speechless wondering what had happened when they sat her up, moved her to the shade and gave her some ice-cold watermelon as she recovered. Somehow this mysterious piece of red fruit had brought life back into her.

I had never tasted a watermelon before and asked my Mom if I could try a piece. For five cents one could buy an ice-cold, thick slice that made one forget how hot it was on this sunny day. I became smitten by this refreshing fruit and decided that when I grew up I was no longer going to become a veterinarian. I was going to become a watermelon farmer instead...

Life intervened, and it took almost fifty years before I tried to grow my first watermelon. We had bought some melons from the back of a truck in Utah. They tasted so good we decided to save seed from both of them. One of them was a Winterkeeper watermelon that can get as big as 13 pounds. It has unique red seeds that give it the other name of Red-seeded Navajo. It truly is a winterkeeper and stays fresh and sweet until Christmas time. The other claim to fame for this melon is that it has a unique crunch to the flesh and is chewier than any other melon by a long shot. Apparently, all the native American melons have red seeds.

When we moved from the prairies to Nanoose we had trouble growing a decent crop of watermelons. We suspected it was because of the cool evenings and high humidity we experience every night by living next to the Salish Sea. Not many people seemed to be successful with them either so one day I went online and searched for watermelon farms. I came up with one in Nevada called the Bundy Watermelon Farm and gave them a phone call to see if I could educate myself to get a bit of an edge.

I talked to Carol Bundy and we became best of buddies in a short while since we had a common goal. I told her about my special melons and she told me about two special

melons they grew. We both ended up sending each other seeds. One of hers was a very special seed from a rare melon named 'The Ancient Watermelon'. This watermelon usually has a crook-neck that serves as a handle. It has an incredible story that you can watch at this link - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOf5HxKingc>.



Apparently, back in the 20's a young man found an undiscovered cave in Arizona. In the cave he found a pitch-coated vial that held watermelon seeds that were estimated to be up to 1000 years old!

This is the part that makes me think. If watermelons are round, they would require two hands to carry one. If they had handles

one could carry many of them. How did the handles come to be on a round fruit? I believe they would have been selected and bred by an ancient horticulturist who had mastered this skill, perhaps as long as 1000 years ago!

Out of the 200 seeds in the vial, two of them sprouted and grew into the Ancient Handled Watermelon. They saved the seed from them and started to grow them at the



Bundy Watermelon Farm where they proved to be the sweetest and firmest watermelons in their lineup. I could hardly contain myself when the seeds arrived in the mail unscathed by Canada Customs.

I started them off early in soil blocks because I knew they would have to be transplanted and I didn't want to disturb the roots on this most valuable specimen.

Soil blocks are just made from pressed compost and soil. I made mine round because I had a tool that worked but most soil blocks are square.

The advantage to a soil block is that the whole rooted block gets transplanted without any upheaval or disturbance to the roots and the roots

lace the block together by being air-pruned.

If you look at the picture on the left, in the middle you can see where the roots have poked out of the block. And on the right-hand side you can see where the roots have feathered-out to feed on the compost but they are not growing anywhere else.

I developed several strategies for growing these exciting plants and tried to capitalize on heat, exposure to the sun, protection from the wind, a good watering regime and most importantly – food. Watermelons require all these things to grow well. In the end we grew six of these special watermelon plants in various conditions and documented all the variables. This summer of 2019 proved to be a challenge getting the melons to produce female flowers. The flowers just faded away by June and only a few melons were developing where I had hand-pollinated. Then at the end of August all the melons seemed to come back to life and produced loads of female flowers but with daylight waning and temperatures getting cooler it became doubtful if the new fruit would have time to mature.

Food became an obvious factor with all the plantings. Plants sown in a depleted raised bed with manure grew tiny little plants with small leaves. Another planting in a 5-gallon pot grew very well at first but after the first three melons formed in May it appeared the plant must have used up all the available nutrients. One of the melons shrivelled up (and stopped growing?), I accidentally stepped on another one, and the remaining watermelon also stopped growing.

Another setup was in a hot zone at the bottom of our neighbors empty swimming pool. It was very hot in that place and the watermelons in there grew big, had dark green leaves and numerous female flowers. The downside there was that the nutrients were all used up from a five-gallon pot and the plant shrivelled up and died by late August after yielding one fairly nice melon.

A fairly successful planting was done in a heap of rich compost inside a plastic hoop house where it is too hot to grow anything other than tomatoes or basil in the summer. Temp's often soar to almost 40C in there and the melons just love it. At time of writing in mid-September the plant in the hoop house is dark green and vigorously growing because I keep top-dressing it with rich compost and keep it well watered. Five melons grew on this plant, although I lost two of them to dastardly rodents.

Out in the open, our three-year old compost heap grew the most melons and produced the biggest, dark green leaves out of the entire lot. There were eight nice fat melons growing out of that heap until the raccoons decided to excavate the heap for worms. So far they have killed five of those valuable melons by breaking stems and digging out roots. Grrr...

However, my best setup was in a greenhouse in a huge box filled with biochar compost with bottom heat provided by a coil of LED rope lights. The lights produce just enough heat, using only 7 Watts, to keep the soil at 23C all the time. The soil was watered with compost tea laced with fish fertilizer. The melon's surface is now covered with a blueish powder that looks like the yeast one sees on grapes. The leaves are dark green and

huge compared to most of the other plantings. It was allowed to sprawl over the entire bench and has several new fruits forming that may just mature in that sheltered location. It did not grow a crooked neck but is tapered at the top.

The picture at the top shows my pride and joy for 2019. An 8-pound Ancient Watermelon whose seeds were found in a cave a hundred years ago...