Watermelons

Did You Know?

Watermelons are about 6 percent sugar and 91 percent water. They are usually a good source of vitamin A, vitamin C, and lycopene. Farmers in 44 States grow every year about 40 million pounds of watermelon, worth more than $500 million. Georgia, Florida, Texas, California, and Arizona are the leading watermelon producers. Most people don't know that watermelons have been brought to you by USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) research.

Watermelons originated in Africa somewhere around the Kalahari Desert. By the 10th century, watermelons were being cultivated in China, which is now the world's single largest watermelon producer. The Moors introduced the fruit to Europe in the 13th century. Watermelons were being grown in Massachusetts in 1629, and Native Americans were known to be growing them in 1664. These original watermelons were very susceptible to diseases and were not very sweet.

In 1938, Charles Fredric Andrus, with USDA ARS's U.S. Vegetable Laboratory in Charleston, SC, began breeding watermelon to increase sweetness and disease resistance. In 1954, he released 'Charleston Grey', considered the classic watermelon variety. Besides having sweet and flavorful taste, 'Charleston Grey' has an oblong shape and a hard rind that makes it easy to stack and ship. Even more importantly, 'Charleston Grey' extensive disease resistance makes it even today a choice for home and commercial growers. In 2007, 'Charleston Gray' was designed by the American Society for Horticultural Science as "the most successfully vegetable cultivar ever developed." It is in the pedigree of 95 percent of the watermelons grown in the world today.

Currently, U.S. Vegetable Laboratory is going back to wild watermelon relatives in Africa to find genes for resistance to problems like watermelon vine decline, root-knot nematodes, zucchini yellow mosaic virus, and wilting diseases. ARS also has more than 1,600 watermelon lines from different parts of the world in a germplasm collection housed in Griffin, GA, which may provide genes for important new traits.