

Summer Melons

Once it starts getting *warm* in the beautiful Mojave Desert, some gardeners throw their hands up in despair. Temperatures **will** rise well above 100°F and we probably **will not** see much rain until October. Summer looks like a tough time for southern Nevada horticulturists *and their plants*. Only a few edible plants thrive under these conditions. Some fruits and vegetables brave the heat, if the intrepid gardener gets water to the growing plants.

The list does not usually include tomatoes. Tomatoes do generally poorer when temperatures get much over 85°F.

Think about something different – like cantaloupe.

Melons and their cousins like warm, even hot, weather. You can seed these vines in the ground as soon as soil temperatures are consistently above 60°F. Any cooler, the little seedlings cannot take up water. Track nighttime temperatures; they are as cool as the soil gets.

When melons are fully ripe, they almost *slip* off the vine into your hand. Even if a little overripe, who will complain? They are amazingly sweet.

Hard-shelled squash, like pumpkins, are related to melons. Starting them when the soil warms up should give pumpkins by Halloween – convenient! All the members of this family suffer when they get dry, and need high soil fertility. Irrigation, compost and slow release fertilizer are important.

As far as heat and drought tolerant plants go, okra is one of the best. You do not need many plants; a single one produces enough for a lot of gumbo. I am not enamored with its taste and texture, but the flowers are attractive, like its relative, hibiscus. They are related to *cotton*! While we do not *eat* cotton, the blossoms **are** pretty, and its package is a cotton boll!



Sweet potatoes are great in high temperatures. If you have one with some sprouts popping out, plant it in warm soil. They have lovely foliage, so it can be a groundcover, or grown up a trellis. Through summer and fall, you have a sweet potato vine. Come Thanksgiving, you should have a little crop of sweets, which is perfect since the leaves die back in the winter. You will be digging up the whole plant, so do not put them around anything that cannot tolerate disturbance.

Peppers **appear** to tolerate higher temperatures than their cousins, tomatoes, but even these are not **hopeless**. In the dead of summer, they are not as terrific as when temperatures were under 90°. You **can keep** them growing through July and August if you provide shade and never let them get dry.



If you would rather use summer for melons and okra, then around the end of June, cut tomato plants down to about five or six inches, water them, and cover the soil with a good layer of mulch. They will come back and by the beginning of October, you should have new tomatoes until the first frost. They may not be the fabulous fruits you had before, but will be more flavorful than the supermarket varieties.

Whenever outside in the summer garden, remember - drink fluids and use sunscreen.

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