

## Melons mean summer

Most of us know, sometimes from sad experience, that several of our favorite vegetables hardly thrive in the Mojave during July and August. Tomatoes are the obvious example. They suffer greatly in the heat, but can return to production in early fall.

How fortunate that some fruiting vegetables flourish during hot periods.

Melons mean summer. Whether we are growing watermelons, cantaloupes (also known as muskmelons), honeydews, or another delicious variety, all of them thrive in high temperatures. Melons are not the only fruits we can grow at this time, but many of their kin – pumpkins, squash, and even cucumbers – can be productive in some of the hottest weather. This group is collectively identified by their family name: Cucurbitaceae, or as “cucurbits”.



*Pumpkins grown at Cooperative Extension's Test  
Demonstration Gardens*

The cucurbits most of us grow are plants that do not like the cold. In fact, when temperatures are below 60°F their roots do not even take up water. Hot weather, however, is just fine. They can grow their huge leaves, produce their yellow flowers, and finally, their delicious and nutritious fruit. Even if you planted your plants late this summer, you will probably still get a crop, as long as they never suffer from a water shortage. For all their good properties, they are not in the least drought tolerant.

A single plant (usually a vine) can produce several fruits. Any one plant can become very large and invade the garden areas where other plants are growing. Under such large leaves, the soil can remain cooler than the air above. The cool soil is still warm enough to maintain plant growth. Big leaves can also shade neighboring plants, sometimes interfering with their development.

Anyone who has grown these vining plants has experienced the challenges they pose. Tendrils look delicate, but they grow into sturdy coils. A plant with tendrils has sacrificed some of its leaf or stem tissue to produce them. As the plant grows, its tendrils wrap around anything it can use

for support – string, stakes, other plants, or whatever item is available. While this certainly benefits the vine, it can be disconcerting to gardeners who are attempting to grow vegetables in addition to melons, squash or cucumbers. Pity a poor little pepper plant that is strangled by an aggressive pumpkin!

It is not necessary to throw up our hands and surrender to over-enthusiastic vines. In fact, we can use the expansive nature of these plants to our own advantage.

Place some kind of support where the vine can attach. A simple garden trellis is a start, but the plant will soon outgrow it. Sturdy string running horizontally between stakes can be a scaffold for them, but long cords hanging down from some kind of framework will help train the vines up. This is “gardening in three dimensions”, a space saving technique that is so helpful for those of us whose gardens are small.

That might even help to limit the population of the dreaded squash bug. Other controls include diatomaceous earth and/or pyrethrin insecticide applied to the plant’s base.

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