Determining Watermelon Ripeness

One of the biggest challenges in growing watermelons is knowing when the melons are ripe and ready to be harvested. The ability to recognize a ripe melon comes from years of experience and careful observation. Choosing a ripe watermelon in the field or garden can be much easier than in the store. In the garden there are several clues to help determine the ripeness of a melon that one does not always have in the store.

Most people rely on four methods of determining melon ripeness in the field:

• Look at the tendril or “pigtail” closest to the melon. When this tendril turns brown and dries out, it is a good sign that the melon is ripe.
• Look at the bottom of the melon where it lays on the ground. When

continued on page 4
Intoxicatingly Beautiful Salvias

Salvias can be used to provide bountiful color to the garden nearly year round. They are a great choice for gardeners who want pretty, bright, long-lasting flowers to enjoy in the garden and in arrangements. The three that are easiest to grow and that are most readily available as bedding plants at garden centers and nurseries are scarlet sage (Salvia splendens), the blue mealy cup sage (S. farinacea), and the native tropical sage (S. coccinea). Aside from being hummingbird magnets, salvias come in a wide variety of colors and growth habits. From sun to shade, there is a species for every garden. With colors that range from red, scarlet, salmon, purple and lilac to deep and light blue, white and bicolors, salvias offer an amazing number of landscape design possibilities.

The results of plant exploration in the 18th and 19th centuries brought dozens of new salvias to English and European gardeners from Mexico, China and Africa. Salvia coccinea, indigenous to the southeastern U.S., Mexico and South America, was grown for decades as a wildflower. Both scarlet sage and mealy cup sage were discovered in the early 1800s, the former in Brazil, the latter in Texas. Salvias are members of the mint family, Labiataeae, and they’re easily recognized from their square stems and opposite pairs of leaves, which are usually rather velvety or hairy. Both S. splendens and S. coccinea are often known as scarlet sage, which could cause confusion, but the plants’ habits are quite different. S. splendens has a rather neat and compact growth habit. However, S. coccinea retains some of its “wild” heritage, with its little more unkempt look. The genus Salvia contains at least 900 species and, because they readily cross pollinate, there are innumerable hybrids.

Salvias are easy to incorporate into a garden. Use the shorter, dwarf salvias to edge a perennial or annual garden. Place tall salvias in front of evergreen shrubs; mass them for visual impact; or spot them around an herb garden to complement the mostly green garden. The taller salvias are the best for cut flowers, so you may want to put a separate bed of them in a cutting garden or plant a row in the vegetable garden. One of the most delightful aspects of salvias, especially S. coccinea, is that they attract butterflies.

Salvias grow well in full sun but most also do nicely in partial shade. During the hot summer months, plant salvias where they will have some protection from midday sun. High light can burn the flower spikes of white, coral and salmon cultivars of S. splendens, changing them from white to brown. Darker colors are more resistant to sun burn.

The best time to transplant any plant is on a cloudy day or in late afternoon so that the plants have a chance to get settled in before they have to contend with the drying effects of the sun. Set salvias in the ground at the same depth they were growing in the pots. When transplanting, try to keep as much soil around the roots as possible so they don’t dry out.

Salvias are relatively maintenance-free, but they do need some attention. When you have selected a site, amend the soil by digging in some compost or peat moss before planting. Water regularly, if it doesn’t rain. Even though S. splendens and S. farinacea need a well-draining soil, lack of moisture is as detrimental as soggy soil. Some salvias, particularly Salvia splendens, are sensitive to alkaline soil. Salvia farinacea and S. coccinea are more tolerant of it. If your soil is alkaline, you can avoid the entire problem by growing your salvias in raised beds or containers, and amending the soil with sulfur and organic matter or a commercial mix.

Most gardeners find salvias to be relatively pest and disease free. However, you might want to keep an eye out for white fly, spider mites and aphids, all of which may cause problems. Fertilize plantings in the garden once a month with a balanced granular or water-soluble fertilizer or use a slow-release fertilizer when you plant. Because salvias will continue to bloom for a long time, remember to keep feeding them. Deadheading, the removal of old flowers, will also increase the number of blooms. In addition to looking beautiful in the garden, salvias make great cut flowers.

One of the more familiar salvias is the perennial common garden sage (Salvia officinalis) and its colorful, fragrant variations. Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist, wrote about their healing qualities back in the first century. However, be aware of Salvia divinorum, a natural herb as potent as LSD. Salvia divinorum is an herb sold in Mexico. There are reports of people smoking salvia and being so reckless they killed themselves. In Florida, you have to be 18 years old to legally buy the herb.

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Color in the Garden

We’re in the midst of the north Florida summer. Though not all plants can tolerate the heat and humidity, fortunately there are many that thrive on it. Summer is a very colorful time in the demonstration garden at the Leon County Extension Center. We encourage you to come visit the garden at 615 Paul
the rhizomes spread incredibly in last year’s plantings, making the plantings increasingly fuller as the summer went on. ‘Lady Di’ and ‘Andromeda’ are two of the cultivars with which we have had success.

Another plant we recently added in full sun is Euphorbia cotinifolia. The plant forms a compact bush about three feet tall, with showy leaves of a coppery-burgundy color. Last year’s plant didn’t overwinter for us, but we were so impressed we had to plant it again this year as soon as we could find it in a local nursery.

Another must-have plant was ‘Acapulco’ agastache. We already have ‘Tutti-Frutti’ agastache, with its dark pink flowers, and both are attractive to hummingbirds. I also read somewhere that deer don’t eat agastache. That could be good news to some of you. ‘Acapulco’ agastache has festive orange and pink blooms, a good complement to the leaves of the Euphorbia cotinifolia next to it in our garden. Another good combination plant for ‘Acapulco’ would be Cordyline australis ‘Red Sensation’.

Many of the so-called tropical plants in our full-sun garden resprouted from the base in the spring and are going strong now. Yellowbells, Tecoma stans, is on its way to being a 7-ft. shrub again with non-stop clusters of bright yellow flowers. The Jatropha integerrima is up several feet tall, with glossy green leaves and lots of little red flowers. Allamanda nerifolia has already grown to be a nice 3-ft. compact shrub, continuously putting out its yellow trumpet-shaped flowers.

Among other plants we have in the sunny areas are firebush (Hamelia patens), angel’s trumpet (Brugmansia), African bulbine, ‘Tropicana’ canna, dwarf red powderpuff (Calliandra haematocephala), hibiscus, Iochroma, variegated tapioca, and mandevilla.

There is plenty of color in the shaded areas of the garden, too. The caladiums have emerged, with leaves of pink and white. The Sanchezia nobilis is coming back a little slowly, but soon its brightly green-and-yellow variegated leaves will make a commanding presence. And there are many types of colorful coleus, from bright red to rusty orange to lime green. Also, remember the lush foliage of variegated shell ginger, Alpinia zerumbet ‘Variegata’.

We’re using lots of the Alternanthera ‘Brazilian Red Hots’ again this season. Their showy dark pink to burgundy foliage just makes it so easy to add a little color to spots in the garden. We have found that though the plant will tolerate full sun, the foliage holds its color best with a little shade from the harsh afternoon sun.

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One of the most delightful things about a garden is the anticipation it provides.

W.E. Johns, The Passing Show
Save Water with Rain Barrels

With dry conditions, mandated water restrictions in many parts of the state and rising prices of almost everything, water conservation is more important than ever. Floridians use more water than any other state for irrigation, and a typical home sprinkler system can account for half of the cost and water use in a household.

One of the most convenient and efficient ways to conserve water is to install a rain barrel. Modern rain barrels involve ancient technology that relies simply on gravity, allowing stormwater to run from a rooftop into a gutter. The gutter funnels water into a plastic food-grade barrel or other container fitted with screen to keep out debris and insects. Most rain barrels also have an overflow device near the top (for heavy storms that might fill the barrel) and a spigot at the bottom for filling a watering can or attaching a hose. Rain barrels vary widely in design, but they can be painted to add a decorative touch, or easily screened behind a shrub.

In addition to conserving water, rain barrels can be a very effective means of preventing stormwater pollution. A large amount of rainwater flows off our roofs onto lawns and driveways, and along the way it can pick up fertilizers, pesticides, heavy metals and bacteria. These pollutants eventually flow downstream to our creeks, bayous and bays, contributing to nonpoint source pollution. Rain barrels interrupt that process by collecting stormwater runoff before it has a chance to pick up pollutants. Using a rain barrel will not only help to reduce the storm water runoff from your yard, but provide a free source of chemical-free water to use for irrigating your landscape!

If you are interested in learning more about rain barrels or how to build your own, a rain barrel workshop will be hosted at the Escambia County Extension office at 10 am on Saturday, August 2. Attendance at the informational portion is free, but there will be a $50 charge for those wishing to build their own rain barrel after the workshop. All supplies and tools will be provided, and Master Gardeners will be available to provide assistance. For more information or to preregister (not required but recommended for those wanting to build rain bar-rels), contact Carrie Stevenson at 850-475-5230 or ctsteven@ufl.edu

Preparing the Landscape for the Storm

Hurricane preparedness for the landscape can be very important with the tropics beginning to heat up. Yes it is hurricane season again and we all need to secure the landscape with proper measurements. As many people know most structural damage is caused by high winds, falling trees and flying landscape debris. It is possible to create a hurricane proof landscape by choosing the right plants and maintaining them correctly.

When choosing storm sustainable trees pay attention to their root development and growth characteristics. Most of the native trees such as the Live Oak are plants that have proven to withstand strong winds during previous storms. The Live Oak is a well-balanced and compact tree so it’s a great survivor tree during storms. Stay away from weakest link trees that consist of a high middle, a very dense canopy, a weak trunk, and shallow roots. Pine trees shouldn’t be planted close to your house.

Even though trees are considered hurricane resistant, they can still be vulnerable to strong winds. Much tree damage caused before the high winds or storms strike. Trees can be damaged by nearby construction, disease or insects (fusiform rust or insect gall). All of these factors can contribute to making trees susceptible to toppling during the storm. Prior to a storm, trees that are less than a year old need to be secured.

Well-designed landscapes can be an asset during a storm. They can include strong, dense landscape plants such as shrubs that will help deflect wind from structures. Proper landscape maintenance is the key to hurricane preparedness. Make sure trees stay healthy throughout the year by keeping them free of insects, properly pruned, and watered. Remember longer water times can create deeper root structures while frequent watering with small amounts will create a swallow rooted tree. The roots will help to better support the tree during high winds.

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Garden Tips for July and August

Flowers

• Annuals to plant include celosia, coleus, crossandra, impatiens, kalanchoe, nicotiana, ornamental pepper, portulaca, salvia and vinca.
• Lightly re-fertilize flowering annual and perennial beds in order to retain their vigor and keep them colorful.
• Remove old flowers (deadhead) to ensure continuous blooming of plants.
• Keep leggy growth pinched back.
• Check flowering plants weekly in order to head off insect or disease problems.
• Do all that you can to increase air circulation between plants so that the foliage and stems can dry off between rain showers to decrease the possibility of fungal diseases such as leaf and stem blights.

Trees and Shrubs

• Remove spent flower heads from crapemyrtles so that they will continue to bloom.
• Watch for spider mites on shrubs and flowers, lacebugs on azaleas and pyracantha, flower thrips on roses, gardenias and other blooming plants, and oleander caterpillars on oleanders. Call your local Extension Office for current pest control recommendations.
• Do any necessary pruning of hydrangeas and gardenias as soon as flowering is finished. They must have sufficient time to re-grow before the dormant season.
• Do not heavily prune any of the spring flowering shrubs such as azaleas, camellias or spiraea.
• Watch for azalea defoliator caterpillars on azaleas. These are the large, black caterpillars that can strip foliage and weaken plants very quickly. Control them by hand picking or with an approved insecticide.
• White webbing that covers the branches and trunks of trees is from a group of insects called the psocids (tree cattle). These insects do not injury trees but feed on surface debris.

Fruits and Nuts

• Prune blueberry bushes, if needed, as soon as possible after harvest is completed. For more information visit the UF/IFAS publication “Pruning Blueberry Plants in Florida” (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS223).

Vegetable Garden

• Establish a compost pile. The high temperatures and frequent showers of summer help to speed up the breakdown process.
• Vegetables that can be planted outdoors include eggplant, lima beans, okra, southern peas, peppers and watermelon.
• Set out new tomato plants by late July in order to have a fall crop. Purchase tomato transplants or root disease free suckers from the spring crop. If possible, obtain one of the “hot set” varieties.
• Watch for and control tomato hornworm and fruitworms.
• Remove old tomato plants from the garden once harvesting is complete. Diseased plants should be burned or removed from your property. Do not place known diseased plant parts in the compost pile.

Lawns

• Watch for sod webworm in lawns, chinch bugs in St. Augustine lawns and spittlebugs in centipede.
• Frequent afternoon showers may cause a fungus called gray leaf spot on St. Augustinegrass, especially where soil is compacted or in the shade. Several applications of a lawn fungicide may be necessary.
• Keep lawn mower blades sharp. This reduces some disease problems and gives the lawn a neater look when it is cut.
• Time for mole cricket control. Use the soap flush technique to determine if sufficient crickets are present to warrant treatment. For more information visit the UF/IFAS publication “Pest Mole Cricket Management” (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/lh039).

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Summer Spiders

At the extension office, we see a lot of critters that homeowners bring in for identification. Some of the arthropods are pests in landscapes and homes but many are either harmless or beneficial organisms.

One common arthropod that we are often asked about is a large brown and orange spider with tufts of hairs on each leg. Will this spider hurt us? Should I kill it? The answer to both questions is no.

Golden silk spiders are beneficial and help to reduce garden pests. Photo: Theresa Friday, Santa Rosa County.
The golden silk spider is a common spider in Florida. Every summer, this beautiful spider builds large webs between the branches of two trees, on porches or in shrubs. The female spider, which is a couple of inches long, sits in the web waiting for a meal. Although the spider looks menacing, it is harmless. In fact, we actually want to have the golden silk spider, along with many other species of spider, in our landscape.

Spiders in general are probably the most beneficial arthropods that live in the landscape. They feed on a variety of other insects including flies, leafhoppers, moths and grasshoppers. Their diet is not just restricted to pest insects but whatever is caught in the web or by stalking. All spiders have this ability but most spiders should be considered non-venomous to humans. The bite of common landscape or house spider would result in a small welt like that of a mosquito bite.

Spiders that Floridians need to be aware of are the black and brown widows. These spiders are venomous to humans. The black widow can be found in areas with clutter or with dark hiding spaces. Brown widows build webs on houses or other structures and rarely bite.

Other venomous spiders, the recluse, are not as common in Florida as most people think. They have been found in Alachua, Bay, Duval, Jefferson and Leon counties, but only after being brought in from other areas. They are not native to Florida. These recluses have occasionally established populations in single buildings, but the vast majority of home sitings of brown spiders are not recluses.

In a landscape, spiders should be left to perform their role as a natural insect controller. Their importance in managing insects can’t be overstated.

For more information on the Gold silk spider visit: http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/misc/golden_silk_spider.htm.

**Centipede Grass—Low Maintenance?**

Centipede grass is thought to be “low maintenance” by university turf specialists, but it has some quirks.

Centipedegrass does not like high pH (above 6.0) and high calcium and magnesium soils; it does not tolerate deep or deciduous tree shade for more than 2 years; and once a disease such as brown patch, pythium or insect-induced problems such as grubs and ground pearls take hold, the grass has a very slow time repairing and re-establishing itself. In fact, a spray regimen of fungicides and/or insecticides might be needed to encourage the remaining grass to fill in the bare spots.

Centipede likes high light levels, soil with moderately low pH levels, and iron present in the soil or fertilizer, and rainfall or irrigation on a weekly basis to get established.

As far as light is concerned, sunlight through tall pines (filtered) is tolerated by centipede, or St. Augustinegrass. We receive many calls from homeowners who bought centipede grass and 2-3 years later their shade trees are more mature and making the centipede vanish. There is no way to fully compensate for the lack of light, except to trim out some tree limbs or take out selected trees and allow light at least 50 percent of the day. Where the centipede dies out, I would recommend a ground cover that would take over in the area, starting at the tree trunks, and growing out. Consult with your local Extension Agent for more information on centipedegrass.

**Spittlebugs are a common pest on centipedegrass. Photo: Theresa Friday, Santa Rosa County.**
Green-wood Cutting Propagation of Oakleaf Hydrangea

Oakleaf hydrangea, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, is a native deciduous shrub occurring from North Carolina west to Tennessee, and south to Florida and Louisiana. It flowers in spring with an elongated panicle up to 12 inches, having white flowers that turn pinkish then brown as they senesce. The plant has large oak like leaves, four to eight inches long with three to seven serrated lobes, hence its common name. I have several growing in a rain garden that has well-drained soil and receives filtered sun light.

Propagation by green-wood cuttings is recommended during summer months. Green-wood cuttings are nearly ripened green-wood that is firm and sturdy and usually taken after spring growth has slowed down. Cuttings can be taken from April-August. Several sources suggest taking cuttings from the ends of non-flowering terminal shoots, which may be few in number, or when the plant has stopped blooming which could be well into July/August.

I have recently taken green-wood cuttings in early June that were about 4-5 inches long, removed the leaves from 2 lower nodes and leaving the terminal bud. It is recommended on larger leaves to reduce or clip off one-third to one-half of the tip of the leaf to reduce excess water loss due to transpiration, which can cause the cutting to dry out or interfere with root formation. I dipped the cutting end in a rooting hormone containing 0.1% indole-3-butyric acid, 1000 ppm IBA talc, stuck them in a moist mixture of 50% peat moss and 50% perlite and placed under a misting system. It is critical that the rooting media remain moist. A transparent plastic
Lichen film, or tent-like covering, over the cuttings can be used to help retain soil moisture in the absence of a misting system. The soil should be kept moist but not soggy. In 3 weeks, the cuttings should begin to form roots. Allow roots to continue to grow for another week or two. At this point, you can monitor root growth by gently inspecting the root zone for visible roots. Plants with a vigorous root system can be transplanted into a larger pot containing a suitable potting soil. Note: rooting timeframe may take longer for non-misting system. Be sure to maintain soil moisture by frequently monitoring soil surface moisture.

When lichen growth is abundant on dying limbs and branches, ask the question, “Why is the plant growing poorly?” Diagnosing the problem may be difficult, requiring considerable knowledge of plants.

The reasons for a plant’s poor health are numerous. It simply could be a case of the wrong plant in the wrong place or poor growing conditions. It may be due to injuries from mowing equipment, misplaced lawn chemicals, etc. Trees and shrubs that are planted too deep will usually be in a state of poor health. The plant may be declining from lack of fertilizer or because the pH is incorrect, or from natural age. Correctly identifying and correcting the cause of poor growth will allow the plant’s health to improve and the lichens will gradually disappear.

Your local UF/IFAS Extension Office can assist with identifying the possible causes for poor plant growth.

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Lichens May Mean Something is Lacking

Do you have trees or shrubs in poor health with their trunks and branches covered with gray-green crusty growths? These growths are lichens. They are harmless and do not cause the poor growth or decline of plants.

Lichen is an alga and a fungus growing together in a symbiotic relationship. The alga supplies the fungus with carbohydrates through photosynthesis and the fungus protects the alga from drying. Lichens are not pathogens nor are they parasitic to the plants on which they are found. They simply need something to structurally support them.

As a tree or shrub declines in health, the canopy thins allowing more light to penetrate the plant. The additional light and the plant’s slow growth create a better growth environment for lichens.

Lichens on crape myrtle tree. Photo: Larry Williams, Okaloosa County.

Lichens may indicate poor plant health. Photo: Larry Williams, Okaloosa County.
## Northwest District Extension Offices

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