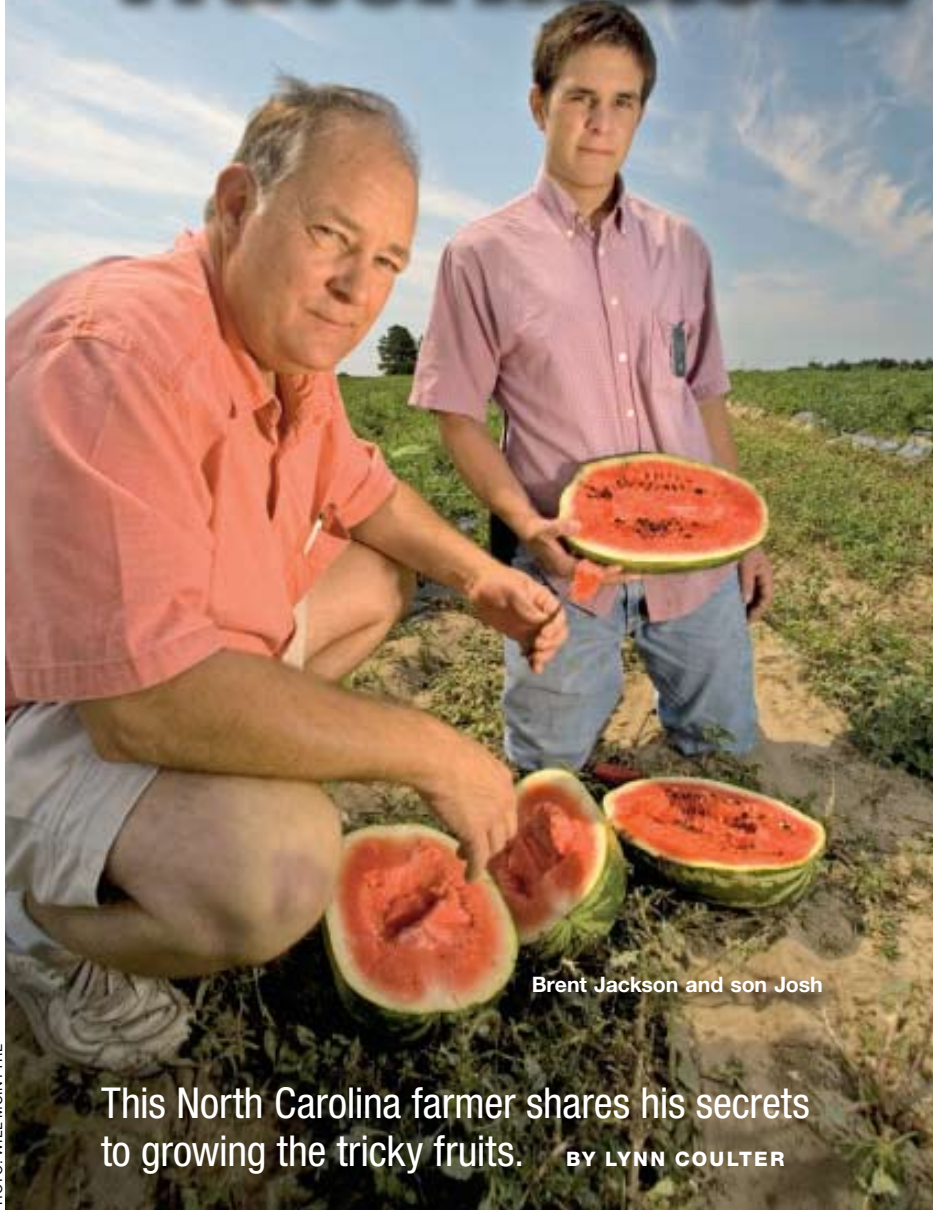


# A World of Watermelons



Brent Jackson and son Josh

This North Carolina farmer shares his secrets to growing the tricky fruits. **BY LYNN COULTER**

PHOTO: WILL MCINTYRE

Whether as big as a volkswagon or small enough to fit in your hand, today's watermelons are more delicious than ever. Commercial growers and gardeners alike admit that the rambling plants can be tricky to grow. The big trend is toward the smaller, hand-size fruit, Brent

Jackson says. And he should know.

Jackson has been growing watermelons since 1981 at his family-owned Jackson Farming Company near Fayetteville, N.C. Here he shares his tips for success:

► **CHOOSE A TYPE.** Find out which varieties work best for your area, Jackson says.

Seedless melons are increasingly

popular, but Jackson thinks the seeded types generally taste better. "Seeded melons are more of a specialty now. We grow 80% seedless to 20% with seeds," he says.

► **WATCH WATER.** Keep melons in well-drained, sandy, loamy soil, and water at the correct time. Jackson makes sure his fields are level to keep water from pooling.

► **FERTILIZE REGULARLY.** Jackson begins with a preplant fertilizer and then delivers water and additional liquid fertilizer to his melons every day. The plants are fed moderate amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, and tissue samples are checked weekly.

► **SPRAY REGULARLY.** As a preventative measure, Jackson applies fungicides on a five- to seven-day cycle, or every seven to 10 days if the weather permits. Asana (Esfenvalerate) is his defense against rindworms, which cause unsightly etching on the exterior of the melons.

► **WATCH CLOSELY FOR DISEASE.** Phytophthora wiped out 60 acres of Jackson's melons in 1999. Vine decline is transmitted by whiteflies and gummy stem blight.

► **HARVEST CAREFULLY.** "People tend to think watermelons are like bowling balls, but we train folks to handle them like eggs," says Jackson.

His crew snips melons from the vines with knives. Then they pass the melons through the fields with a rhythmic swing and send them to the packing house.

► **DETERMINE RIPENESS.** "A lot of people can tell when they're ready by the stripes and the change of colors," says Jackson.

Other ways of determining a ripe melon include flipping it onto its belly and looking for a good shine and a creamy color or patting melons, rather than thumping them.

"I listen for a crisp ring. A dead sound means it is bruised, has a hollow heart, is overripe, or has a combination of those things," says Jackson. ●

## A watermelon for every taste

Jackson raises both seeded and seedless melons in a range of sizes and colors.

**AMARILLA.** He recommends this melon for its sweet, yellow meat, although he points out that most consumers still prefer red flesh. Amarillas can reach 8 to 15 pounds and bear dark green stripes on lighter rinds.

**CELEBRATION.** This is Jackson's choice as "one of the better seeded melons." It matures early—in about 83 days—and reaches 22 to 26 pounds.

**PIXIE.** This is a new mini seedless that Jackson started growing in 2006. These round melons are a black-green with paler green stripes and weigh only 4 to 6 pounds.

**IMAGINATION.** One of his most beautiful melons, Jackson says, is Imagination. This near-black watermelon shines like a bowling ball and has a deep red flesh. "It's absolutely gorgeous to display, and it sells itself when sliced. The only negative is its short shelf life, which is about one week."

**LIBERTY.** Another of his newer melons, Liberty holds up to 30 days after harvest and has a crisp, dark red flesh when it matures at about 20 pounds.



Amarilla



Celebration



Pixie



Imagination



Liberty

## Dry-Weather Tomato Pest



BY LOIS TRIGG CHAPLIN

I came back from vacation to find spider mites on my tomatoes. The plant leaves feel like they have powder on them, and you can see very fine spiderwebs near the stalks of the plants. I let the neighborhood kids come over and pick vegetables; a lot of the tomatoes get eaten on the spot. What is the best way to take care of this problem organically? I have heard hard sprays of water dislodge mites but won't get rid of them.

Mites are indeed worst during dry weather, but spraying mites off with a strong stream of water is only partially effective. Try spraying with neem, a botanical that acts as a miticide, fungicide and insecticide. The



PHOTO: CLEMSON UNIV./USDA CES, BUGWOOD.ORG

Material Safety Data Sheet for 70% clarified hydrophobic oil of neem (the formula used in many "triple" control products) does not show any waiting period from application to harvest.

I called the maker of Garden Safe brand, who said that the spray must be dry before harvesting. Check the label of any formulation you buy for information about a waiting period to harvest.

Neem is OMRI certified, which means it is approved for use in organic farming. You should be able to buy it at a local farm or garden center or big-box store. If not, try Gardens Alive at [www.gardensalive.com](http://www.gardensalive.com) or Peaceful Valley Farm Supply at [www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com).

When spraying for mites, it is very important to use a fine spray and coat the stems and underside of the leaves thoroughly, in addition to hitting the foliage from the top. Don't spray in hot weather or you may fry the foliage. Wait until late afternoon. ●