



Photos by Bob Ratliff

Make (Less) Room for Melons



Americans love watermelons, but the melons many of us want today are not the big 20 pounders usually associated with summer picnics.

Personal-sized watermelons are gaining popularity, especially in larger cities. A 5- to 6- pound soccer-ball-sized melon—perfect for a small family and fits easily into the average home refrigerator—is what many shoppers want, even though the price is about the same as for the larger varieties.

Because of the changing melon preference, MAFES researchers at the Truck Crops Branch Experiment Station in Crystal Springs are conducting research with new varieties that can be grown by Mississippi's commercial producers.

The focus is on cantaloupe-sized seedless melons, said vegetable specialist Rick Snyder.

"We grew six different small seedless melons this year," he said. "They all grew and produced well in our trials."

Mississippi's commercial producers grow about 4,000 acres of watermelons each year, down from about 10,000 just a few years ago. Snyder said the introduction of personal-sized melons may not bring the commercial acreage back up, but it could mean more profit for producers.

"Right now, demand for watermelons drops off sharply after the Fourth of July holiday every year," he said. "The ease of transporting and storing the smaller melons in home refrigerators, as well as the fact that they are more easily eaten before they spoil, could keep them in demand all summer."

The small melons may eventually prove popular with home gardeners, but Snyder added that for now, limited availability of seed will likely keep them strictly a commercial crop.