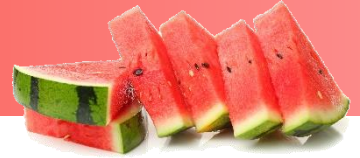


So Much Watermelon!

Brenda Davis, RD



Summer and watermelon go hand in hand. There is nothing like a plate of cold and crispy watermelon on a hot summer's day. While everyone knows that watermelon is a tasty treat, not everyone is aware of the great nutrition in watermelon. When I was in university, our professor had students draw the name of a food item from a hat, look up its nutritional value, and share their findings with the class. I will never forget how surprised she was by learning about the nutritional profile of watermelon. She told the class that she had always thought watermelon was tasty but was nothing special from a nutrition perspective. If you are a watermelon fan, I think you will enjoy learning about watermelon nutrition, and many other interesting watermelon facts. If you always serve watermelon as a snack or dessert, you will love discovering new ways of preparing this wonderful fruit.

Watermelon is a member of the Cucurbitaceae family. While we lump watermelons into the melon category, they're botanically classified as a type of berry called a pepo. Watermelon originated in Africa, where wild varieties have grown for over 5,000 years. In many African cultures, watermelon is an important water source during dry seasons. Some tribes used to bury watermelons in the sand for preservation, ensuring a water source when other options were scarce.



Watermelons were introduced in Europe during the 7th century gradually spreading across the continent and becoming particularly popular in Mediterranean countries. They reached China by the 10th century and the Chinese developed new varieties and techniques for cultivation, contributing to the watermelon's diversity. In China, watermelon is associated with good fortune and happiness. The Chinese developed the tradition of watermelon carving, creating intricate designs on the rind for special occasions. I received such a watermelon when I was welcomed to Calgary at a wonderful vegan Taiwanese restaurant.



In Japan, square watermelons were developed in the 1980s, not just as a novelty but as a practical solution for easier storage in refrigerators. These unusually shaped melons have since become luxury gift items.

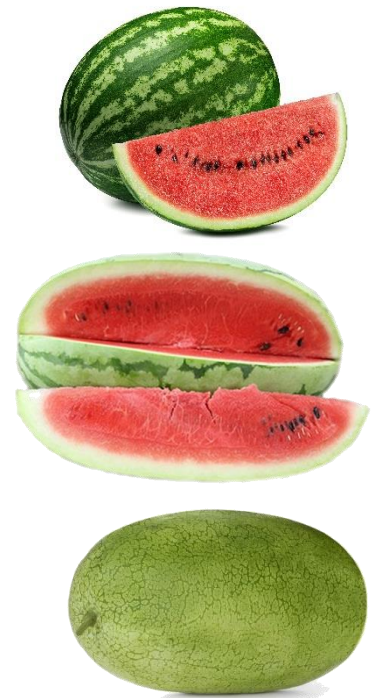


European explorers and traders brought watermelons to the Americas in the 16th century. By the 17th century, watermelons were cultivated in Florida, and they soon became a common crop in many parts of the United States. Watermelon-eating and seed-spitting competitions are popular at many summer festivals and county fairs.

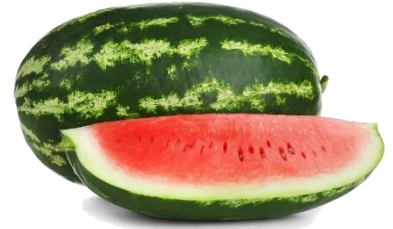
Watermelon Varieties

Watermelons come in many shapes, sizes, and colors. Some are seeded and contain fairly large black seeds. Today, about 90% of watermelons grown in the U.S. are seedless varieties. These are products of hybridization and have only been available since the 1950s. While the classic red-fleshed, green-rind watermelon is the most common, watermelons can also have yellow or orange flesh. Watermelons range in size from about 2 to 50 pounds or more. The heaviest watermelon on record weighed over 350 lbs and was grown in Tennessee. While there are over 1,200 watermelon varieties, about 50 cultivars are common. Here are a sampling of our favorites:

1. **Crimson Sweet** – sweet and juicy seeded watermelon with deep red, juicy flesh. Although it is seeded, there are relatively few small black seeds.
2. **Jubilee** – large, oval watermelons weighing about 25 to 35 pounds. They have a thick, light green rind with thin dark green stripes. While traditionally seeded, there are now seedless Jubilees available.
3. **Charleston Gray** – 20-30 pound seeded melon with bright red flesh and a thick light green rind with darker green markings. It is less sweet than many other varieties.



4. **Allsweet** – large, oblong, seeded watermelons, weighing 25-30 pounds, with alternating dark and light green stripes. Flesh is bright red, firm, and sweet.



5. **Black Diamond** – round, seeded watermelon with a deep green rind. The flesh is deep red and very juicy. This is a large 15-50 pound watermelon.



6. **Carolina Cross** – a big, oval, seeded watermelon that can grow to 100-200 pounds. The rind is thick and light green with darker green markings.



7. **Sugar Baby** – a compact 8 to 12-pound, seedless, round melon with very dark green rind. The flesh is deep red, super sweet, and very juicy.



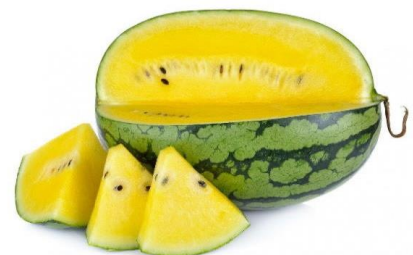
8. **Big Tasty** – seedless hybrid is small, crisp, and extraordinarily flavorful. In a taste test, it beat out 50 other varieties.



9. **Orangeglo** – this is a hybrid variety that is a cross between an orange and a watermelon. It has bright orange flesh and green striped rind. It is a sweet melon with a hint of citrus and can weigh up to 30 pounds.



10. **Yellow and Yellow Baby** – these watermelons have a light green rind with dark green stripes and yellow flesh. Yellow melons tend to be milder in flavor and



sweeter than red varieties. Yellow baby are a smaller 2-4 lb version of yellow.

Watermelon Selection Tips

It can be disappointing to buy a big watermelon, crack it open, and discover that it is pale and tasteless or mushy inside. Choosing a ripe watermelon that is firm and ripe takes skill. These tips will turn you into a pro in no time:

1. **Look for a creamy yellow or near-orange field spot:** These spots on a watermelon tell us that it sat on the ground as it ripened. A white or light yellow field spot signals an unripe watermelon that lacks flavor.
2. **Choose a melon that is heavier than expected:** A ripe watermelon should feel heavy for its size, as it is dense and has a high-water content.
3. **Do the tap test:** Knock on the watermelon. A ripe one should produce a deep, hollow sound – like a drum. This indicates it is high in water and ripe. If the knock sounds higher pitched and dense, the melon may not be ripe.
4. **Check the surface:** Look for a dull, not shiny, surface. A shiny appearance may indicate an underripe melon. Choose a melon with a firm exterior with no soft spots, cuts, dents, or cracks.
5. **Examine the stem:** A dry, brown stem suggests the melon is ripe. If it's green, it may have been picked too soon.
6. **Look for symmetry.** Choose a symmetrical watermelon without irregular bumps.



Storing Watermelon

If you are not eating your watermelon right away, store it on the countertop out of direct sunlight. Fresh watermelon will usually store well in a cool room for 1-2 weeks. If you know your watermelon is very ripe, put the entire melon in the fridge. When in the fridge, it will keep for 2-3 weeks. Once the watermelon is sliced, store it in the refrigerator in an airtight container or cut side-down on a plate.

Ways to Use Watermelon

The most common way to eat watermelon is to slice it into wedges, cubes, or balls and enjoy it fresh. However, you might be surprised to learn that there are many other ways to enjoy this fruit.

1. **Smoothies:** Watermelon can be added to smoothies, fresh or frozen.
2. **Juice:** There are lots of recipes for watermelon drinks, but one of the easiest is watermelon juice – simply blend fresh watermelon until it is smooth. Add some frozen watermelon or ice cubes to make it frosty.
3. **Salads:** Cubed watermelon adds a sweet contrast to savory salads, often paired with mint.
4. **Grilled:** Grilling watermelon caramelizes its sugars, creating a unique flavor profile.
5. **Frozen treats:** Watermelon popsicles are especially refreshing in hot weather. Just freeze blended watermelon in popsicle molds. You can make watermelon ice cream by freezing it solid and putting it through a Yonana machine (add bananas, if desired). You can also make it in a blender or food processor (add a little lime juice or milk if needed).
6. **Cold soups:** Watermelon gazpacho soup is a refreshing summer soup.
7. **Fruit leather:** Yes, you can dehydrate watermelon!
8. **Pickled watermelon rind:** In some cultures, watermelon rind is used to make pickles, kimchi, and other condiments.

9. **Watermelon seed snacks:** Roasted and salted watermelon seeds are enjoyed in many parts of the world.

Nutritional Value

So, what nutrients in watermelon surprised my professor? I think it was the levels of pro-vitamin A carotenoids, vitamin C, and potassium that were a surprise to her. Although watermelon is well over 90% water, it comes packaged with impressive nutrition.

A 2-cup (300 g) serving of watermelon contains less than 100 calories (92 to be exact), about 23 grams of carbohydrates, almost 2 grams of protein, 1.2 grams fiber, and very little fat (0.4 grams).

Watermelon is rich in vitamins and minerals. A 2-cup serving provides:

- Vitamin C: 25 mg
- Vitamin A: 1,730 IU
- Potassium: 340 mg
- Magnesium: 30 mg
- Iron: 0.8 mg

One of the most notable features of watermelon is its high lycopene content. Lycopene is a powerful antioxidant that gives watermelon its red color and has been associated with various health benefits, including reduced risk of prostate cancer and improved heart health. Watermelon is one of the best dietary sources of lycopene, even topping tomatoes in some cases.

Watermelon seeds, often discarded, are rich in protein, fatty acids, and minerals like magnesium, zinc, and iron.

It's worth noting that while watermelon is nutritious, it has a high glycemic index of 72. However, its glycemic load is low because of its high water content. This means it doesn't cause large spikes in blood sugar when consumed in moderate amounts.



Minty Watermelon Salad

Makes 6 servings

This super simple salad is light, flavorful, and gorgeous! Serve with grilled tofu or tempeh and veggies.

Ingredients:

Salad

- 6 cups cubed watermelon
- 1 cup blueberries
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh mint, chopped
- 1 large lime, juiced
- Dash of salt (optional)

Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, combine watermelon, blueberries and mint.
2. Add a sprinkle of salt to the lime juice (if using salt). Drizzle the lime juice over the salad and toss gently to combine. Decorate with mint leaves.
3. Chill for 30 minutes before serving.



Watermelon Juice

Makes 2 servings

This is an incredibly refreshing beverage. It is great to serve at a barbeque with guests. Instead of, or in addition to the lime, add the juice of 1 freshly squeezed lemon, orange, or grapefruit.

Ingredients

4 cups watermelon cubes

1 fresh lime, juiced

Instructions

1. Blend the watermelon and fresh lime juice until very smooth.
2. Serve with ice. Decorate with berries and mint, if desired.



Watermelon Smoothie

Makes 2 servings

Watermelon is the perfect addition to a summer fruit smoothie. Enjoy!

Ingredients

1 cup unsweetened, nondairy milk

1/3 cup hempseeds

2 cups cubed seedless watermelon (or watermelon with seeds removed)

1 fresh lime, juiced

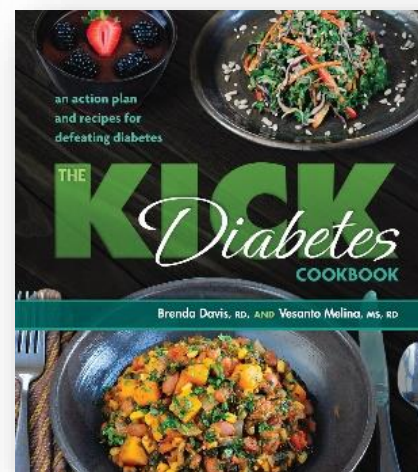
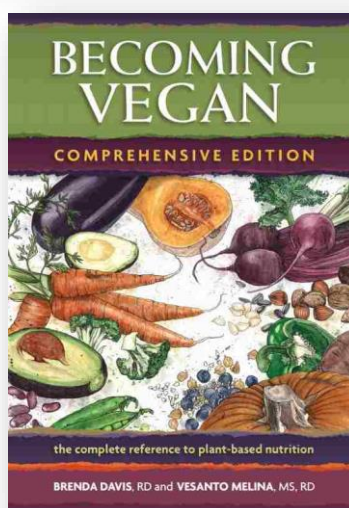
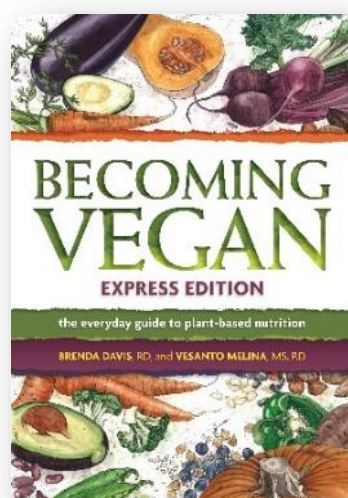
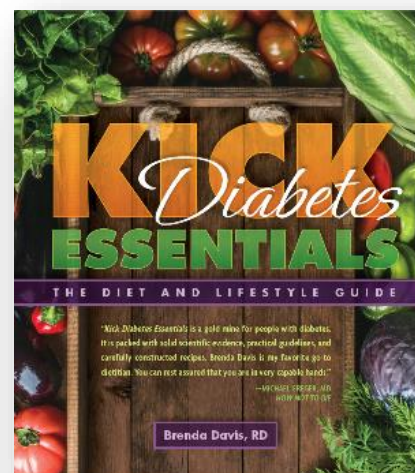
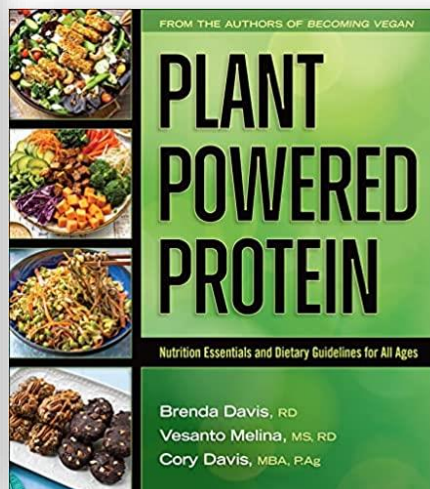
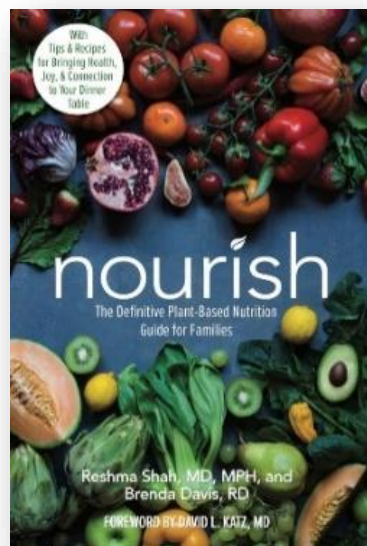
1 peeled, chopped, frozen banana

1 cup frozen strawberries

Instructions

1. Blend nondairy milk and hempseeds until smooth.
2. Add watermelon and lime juice. Blend until smooth.
3. Add frozen bananas and strawberries. Blend until smooth.
4. Serve immediately.





This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. Brenda Davis, RD is a plant-based pioneer and author/co-author of 13 books on plantbased diets. She is co-Author of Nourish: the definitive plant-based nutrition guide for families, Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive and Express Editions and Kick Diabetes Essentials. www.brendadavisrd.com