

Want to try your hand at growing cantaloupe right here in Kitsap County? Now's the time to start your seeds. Lifelong gardeners Patt Kasa, WSU Cooperative Extension Coordinator, and retired electrician Edison (Pinky) Fisk of Central Kitsap were willing to share their secrets of success.

Pinky starts with seeds from Territorial and recommends either 'Early Gold' or 'Early Sweet' which are "the most dependable." Patt orders her seeds from Territorial and likes 'Fastbreak' because the plants are resistant to fusarium wilt and powdery mildew (both pluses in our climate). The most important factor, both agree, is "keeping the plants warm" from seed starting to harvest. Territorial's catalogue says plants "mature in 69 days."

Patt starts her seeds on top of the fridge because it's the warmest spot in her house, keeping the temperature at about 74 or 75 degrees. Seeds germinate in seven to ten days. Once sprouted Kasa moves the plants under grow lights keeping the top of the plants four inches below the light. It's safe to use fluorescent lights but you'll probably want to keep the tops of the plants about ten inches away in this case to prevent too much heat she explained. "The closer the plants are to light the more sturdy they will be," says Patt. Leggy seedlings indicate the light is too far away.

When seedlings develop their second pair of true leaves start fertilizing using a quarter strength dilution of liquid fertilizer such as Miracle Grow 10-10-10. Pat uses the diluted fertilizer every time she waters, keeping the plants evenly moist. Both Fisk and Kasa agree that cantaloupes are thirsty plants. Patt puts the plants outside when nighttime temperatures remain at 50 degrees.

Patt stresses that "timing is really important because you want to get the plants out and planted before their roots become constricted. Our weather sometimes makes that tricky." Kasa recommends planting in raised beds and using black plastic around the plants to radiate more heat or use row covers, cloches or plastic to retain heat especially if the weather starts cooling off.

Kasa uses organic fertilizer and side dresses with compost so nutrients will leach into the soil. She says the trick is starting the plants early and pinching out the vine when two fruits have formed. It takes several weeks for the plant to decide if it's going to continue branching. Sometimes the plant will make only two vines. This technique also works with squash and any vining crop. Continue pinching the vine so it will send all its energy into producing fruit. In nice long warm summers her plants make four fruit per vine. She also puts straw or dried non-treated (i.e. no weed killer was used) grass clippings under the fruit, turning the fruit gently without twisting the fruit off the stem. This helps keep fruit from rotting on the bottom.

"The yield depends on the weather. I harvest over several weeks. Enough to make it worth the effort. Some years a handful but other times a reasonable good harvest," says Patt.

Pinky takes heat one step further growing his cantaloupe in his compost pile. Being a retired electrician, Fisk uses electricity to add extra warmth for growing the tasty melons. Fisk starts with his "rough" compost pile which is five feet square. He plants five plants – one in the middle and one in each corner. To keep the plants warm he cuts the bottom out of five gallon buckets set into the compost then fills the buckets part way up with well-screened compost and places a plant in each bucket. "I weave an electric heating cable (the kind to start seeds) around the buckets to keep the plants evenly warm," said Fisk.

Nearby he keeps a twenty-five gallon bucket of water warmed by the sun and waters the plants with warm water. Each plant takes about four gallons of water. Pinky also uses clear plastic over the top of the plants to keep them warm, but removes the plastic on sunny days because "it can burn the heck out of them," adding, "I never had to fertilize the cantaloupe because of the compost and I use black plastic around the plants to keep

them warm.” Some years we ate golf-ball sized cantaloupe and other times they were huge Pinky explained. “I grew cantaloupe just for the fun of it. But I’m getting older and now you can buy them for five cents a pound. I’ll still grow tomatoes this year in the compost but not cantaloupe,” he said.

Thanks Pinky and Patt for the planting advice and may you and your gardens continue to grow and flourish.

You can email comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.