

# "RUDOLPHUS CERVUS NASUM RUBIGUNDUM HABEBAT"



Welcome to [www.vegetableseeds.net.au](http://www.vegetableseeds.net.au). The first line of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer heads this month's newsletter - makes a change from reading plant names in Latin, as we head towards the festive season.

## Christmas past, Christmas present and Christmas yet to come



This is the season in the home vegetable garden that offers a rich bounty of beetroot "baby", basil, lettuce "sierra" and "slo bolt", spinach "steadfast", snow pea "Oregon Giant", snap peas "Sugar bon", main crop peas "onward", early potatoes "Pink eyes", chives, parsley, bean "trionfo purple" Mantequilla's and much more, and we remember their flavours and aromas which all compliment the Christmas table or BBQ with whatever your

favourites are: roast turkey, chicken, capon, pork, lamb, beef, prawns, salmon, and every culinary delight that have been enjoyed by many generations long before us.

All the hard winter work and spring sowing planting weeding and feeding is rewarded. We don't all have a large, perfect vegetable garden, but even a small back yard vegie patch with a few potted vegies has a sense of achievement, perfection and satisfaction for us.

Home gardeners also look forward to the harvest in the New Year, looking every day to see how they are coming on: pumpkins "orange cuties" "sweet grey" "butternut", Zucchini "Black Jack", sweet corn "F1" and "bicolour", carrots "Mokum" "Sugarsnax" "Merida" "Kuroda", dry beans "le monde piemonte" Edamame, green beans "Andersons wonder", tomatoes "Santa" "black plum" Siletz "Oregon spring" "Ailsa craig", capsicums "Super shepherd", chillies "Hungarian hot wax" Melon "Yellow doll" "Passport" "Sugar baby" and much more.



The summer is also the time to be thinking about the winter garden, the cold frost loving winter crops like leeks, Brussels sprouts, cauliflowers, kale, broccoli, purple sprouting broccoli, savoy King cabbages, have to be sown or planted before mid-February.

You can also sow summer green manures like pearl millet in December where crops have been harvested. These are drought tolerant from semi -arid regions in Africa, and will grow with a sprinkling of water for germination after which you could go on holiday and they will grow with almost no moisture whatsoever. They swamp out weeds, improve your soil and aide water retention in the autumn by acting as a cover crop.

## Plants of the Month



Watermelon “Yellow doll” and “Sugar baby”, honey dew melon “Passport” and Rock melon “Fastbreak”.

This is a crop that can be grown by home gardeners in a cool climate. The climate in Tasmania is ideal for growing melons but they must be varieties suited to short growing seasons. I have grown melons successfully in my garden in Tasmania since 2008.

There is a chain of events which make melon growing successful which starts with warm soils,

warm night time temperatures, increasing day length, sunny weather, small but constant amounts of watering and selecting an early fruiting variety bred by professionals, one that growers call a 65 to 70 day variety. It is no good growing an 85 to 90 day variety we just do not have a long enough growing season here for these to ripen outdoors.

This newsletter is about you having success at growing melons in your home garden, the microclimate of the garden is very important it has to be the most sheltered and warmest part of your garden, there is no point trying to grow melons in cold wet soils in exposed areas with the wind ripping over the vegie garden and they do not tolerate frost, trying to get a head start by sowing early spring when days are still short with a heat mat indoors does not always work, In these situations growth will be slow or the plants collapse and even if they do grow when transplanted they will struggle.

My garden is in a cold area the soils are slow to warm in spring and we get late frosts and winds, but I can grow melons outdoors. This is how...



Firstly I began by walking round my garden several times in the year, looking for the very warmest spot, I watched the growth rate of all the plants, when daffodils flower, grass growth, wattles flowering, where there were no frosts, where it felt slightly warmer in winter, where the rain dried up quicker in winter, so I worked out the cold areas, mild areas and warm areas by observation.

In my garden there is just one area where all these factors occur, a tall viburnum tinus shelters one side, the house wall another, it is in full sun, and although not North East facing, the soils warm quicker than anywhere else, you could make your own microclimate with similar observations.



I cleared a site added aged compost and COF, and put a sheet of black plastic down in spring to increase the soil temperature. I grew six watermelon plants variety "Yellow Doll" in a punnet on a heat mat set at 27 degrees centigrade in October in my shed.

They germinated, grew two small seed leaves but even when placed on a window sill in light and fed with liquid seaweed no true leaves appeared, I planted them in the warm black plastic in early November, the seedlings were not strong enough, the daily temperatures and day length was not right which is why they did not get true leaves, the root systems were not strong and most of the seedlings collapsed. Two survived.

So I sowed more seeds in the plastic in late November, put some slug pellets down, these seedlings emerged in five days and grew stronger than the original two seedlings, getting their first true leaf in only a week and a half, you can tell when conditions are right because a tiny true leaf starts to appear in just a few days in the middle of the two seed leaves. They grew slowly but by mid-December more strong leaves grew and tendrils extended to form a spidery 1m wide plant, then the largish yellow flowers appeared all over the vines and I thought these small wiry plants can't possibly produce melons before March.

I netted the plants from pests and set up a watering system to water half an hour twice a day. After Christmas I almost forgot about them, and then in late January I went out and had a look and saw a 12cm green striped globe amongst the foliage, and another four developing.

The next step was to see if the fruit was ripe. I squeezed it every day, it was a hard solid ball, until in mid-February my thumb pressed slightly into the skin of a now 16cm melon, and I guessed it was ready but expecting to see a pale green bitter tasting fruit with lots of seeds, when cut it had bright yellow flesh with very few seeds and juice dripping all over my hands and it was mouth wateringly sweet.

Skilful technicians who understood genetics bred this variety to perform exactly as I saw it which included a strong stem and early true leaf, leaves and tendrils which grew fast but not too long with no diseases, larger than usual yellow flowers which did not abort in cool nights, early fruit which grew to their optimum size and ripened quickly, bright yellow flesh with very sweet flavour.

This is an excellent variety for short season cool climates and the business who released this knew their market and knew that customers would buy this melon from the supermarkets, greengrocers, and markets. I had eight melons per plant in the home garden and I have grown the variety "Yellow Doll" every year since.

In sheltered warmer areas of the cool climate garden the black plastic sheet is vital for warming the soil, but another way is to use three black car tyres stacked on top of each other or, if you do not want to use tyres, use 350mm black plastic pots instead, fill them with rotted compost, not fresh manure as this will burn the seedlings, and top with potting mix.

Sow the seeds in mid to late November or transplant seedlings at the third leaf stage with a strong root system, keep as much soil around the roots as possible. Please do not tease the roots out they do not like transplanting so handle them carefully.

The black plastic obviously absorbs heat which accelerates root growth and combined with the long summer days many leaves and tendrils will form, flowering and then fruiting start sooner. The plants in containers need to be kept moist but not overwatered throughout the growing season. In autumn the plant loses vigour quickly, and will not produce any more melons.

Melons can also be grown in a hot house in 350mm black plastic pots. Sow the seeds or transplant seedlings as above but you may need to pollinate the flowers by dusting them with a small brush by hand if no bees or insects can get into your hot house.



The varieties I would recommend growing in cool climates are Watermelon “Yellow Doll” Water melon “sugar baby”, honeydew melon variety “Passport”, rock melon variety “Fastbreak”. We are currently working on trials with other early varieties.

## **Jobs for the Month**

### **Food glorious food**

Use complete organic fertilizer (COF) as mentioned in [www.vegetableseeds.net.au](http://www.vegetableseeds.net.au) a handful around every vegetable plant. Place well-rotted, but not fresh, bulky organic matter around plants like pumpkins and squashes. Water sulphate of potash on fruiting plants like tomatoes, capsicums, melons, cucumbers twice a Month, and fish emulsion, or similar, once a week on all the plants.

### **Water, water everywhere**

Every year is different some years you may think summer will never come being so wet and windy. In other years there may be little or no rain. Drought tolerant plants are being selected by plant breeders, this is serious work the Tepary bean, and pearl millet are examples, but most crops still need water especially when they are at their peak of growth in the hot summer months.

If rain is not expected water at least half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon, some plants need more in very dry periods. Requirements are different for each crop Corn needs lots of water, tomato plants need consistent watering, beans need a lot initially but once producing strong pods need less. Squashes and pumpkins need a lot, carrots a good soak once a day, melons and cucumbers like to be moist but not overwatered, Tepary bean need virtually no water at all. We have two 2500lt tanks for our vegetable garden which have proved invaluable.

Finally for our Tasmanian customers, have a look at [www.langdalefarm.com](http://www.langdalefarm.com). Fiona and Oliver have been raising Wessex saddleback pigs for four years now, they care about the environment and how they produce quality pork products including bacon, rolled roasts, belly pork. Fiona and Oliver have Christmas hams on offer. Oliver grew our leeks about three years ago and mentioned the quality and taste on their blog, the variety we offer is called “Ginka”.

For any of you in the Northern Hemisphere now is the time to harvest early Brussels sprouts, cabbages, kale and broccoli; the colder the weather the sweeter tasting they get.

Happy gardening to all our readers and customers wherever you may be and have a very Merry Christmas.