Small but Perfectly Formed: Melon-growing Bournville
NIKY RATHEONE

In my Bournville garden (in Birmingham) the courgettes romped away, over the containing boundaries of the raised vegetable beds, down the paths, and attempted to climb over the hedge. We sat on the terrace and ate sweet, juicy melons; watermelons, cantaloupe melons, green and yellow. They reminded me of hot days in Greece. What a joy, I thought, to wander down the garden, to the vegetable patch, and cut a delicious, fresh, juicy melon from its stalk and bear it triumphantly to the kitchen. On my list of things to do in the garden, I wrote 'melon seeds'.

The following spring, I walked round the corner to the tempting garden centre directly behind my house, source of many ambitious plans. I studied the packets of melon seeds and came away with an enticingly illustrated packet. In April the sun came out for one of those brief, deceiving bursts of warmth. I carefully sowed my melon seeds, a great many of them, upright like cucumber seeds (to prevent rotting) two to a small pot, put them into my heated propagator, and covered the whole thing with a black plastic bag to deceive the seeds into thinking they were in the warm, dark earth of the Mediterranean.

Whether this worked or not, they germinated fast and furiously. Concerned that the stout little green shoots should not become etiolated, I moved the propagator into the conservatory. By mid-May my melon plants were more than ready for transplanting, and there were a great many of them. I took the stoutest and largest and transplanted them into larger pots.

At Whitsun, I judged that the frosts were definitely past, the melons were outgrowing their pots again, and I considered their next move. The open garden was still, I thought, too cold for my delicate little plants. So I looked for an alternative, and found it in my plastic mini-greenhouse, just emptied of over-wintering lilies. I took my largest plastic pots, put a good handful of manure at the bottom of each, added a mix of compost, John Innes loam and pelleted chicken manure, and planted out five of the stoutest melon plants into the mix, putting the
pots into deep trays and watering well. I transplanted another three into similar pots and put them back in the conservatory. The rest I regretfully added to the compost heap. I also planted out the year’s supply of courgettes, germinated with the melons.

For the next two months I kept the compost wet, and fed the plants with tomato fertiliser. The ones in the conservatory struggled, and it was difficult to keep up with the watering, but those in the mini-greenhouse grew quite well, twining themselves up around the shelf supports. I plied them with fertiliser and water, and in August they flowered, though not as profusely as I’d hoped.

That August I visited Spetchley Park, in Worcestershire. There I was intrigued to see a long, sunken greenhouse (specially for growing melons) and with melons growing in it. Back in Bournville, three flowers in the plastic greenhouse and two in the conservatory set seed and started to swell. Now it was a race against the shortening days and cooler weather. One melon in the conservatory I harvested at the size of a golf ball, as I was going away for a week. It was rather tasteless, but recognisably a melon. One, in the plastic greenhouse, revealed itself to be a courgette. When I returned from a week away, two small melons were still growing in the plastic greenhouse, though their development was slight. I harvested these in late September. One was the size of a golf ball, like the one grown in the conservatory, but the other was fully the size of a tennis ball! Both tasted recognisably of melon.

Then I saw the Victorian Kitchen Garden on video. This series included detailed instructions for growing melons in glasshouses. I have learned the crucial importance of free-draining, fibrous soil, and a constant temperature. Like old Victorian gardeners, I shall be carrying the melon seeds around for a while in my pocket to encourage better germination, standing the little plants out in their pots, with moss wrapped around them, to acclimatise, and possibly even packing grass turfs onto a raised grid to give a free-draining soil bed. I know about the importance of knotting the swelling fruits to prevent them falling off the vine, and even how to cunningly secure the melon to the vine with a matchstick. If officers serving in Afghanistan in 1888 could be impressed by the sweet-tasting melons grown there, I thought, surely I can grow them successfully in Bournville.

Then last year I had a new toy; a plastic cold frame. I successfully germinated five melon seeds, and left them in pots in a friend’s very hot conservatory while I went away in early June. When I came back two of the little seedlings had grown about a foot, one was looking promising, one was definitely lagging
behind, although healthy, and one was looking distinctly sickly. The weather turned very unsuitably cold and windy, so I kept the melons in my own conservatory as long as I dared, with short excursions into the garden to harden them up a bit. I am sorry to say that I also invested in some slug pellets.

Suddenly the weather turned boiling hot. Delighted, I opened up the cold frame, dug some pits and filled them with rich compost and manure, planted the three largest melon plants, watered them in and scattered blue slug pellets round them, closed the whole contraption up tight and kept them as hot as possible. They grew, in spite of slugs - which seemed only slightly deterred by the pellets and chomped up the odd leaf. By the beginning of July the melon vines were growing quite well along the ground; they have quite a different habit of growth from courgettes, and I realised that lifting the vine off the ground is important. So I created a contraption of crossed canes and string for the melon vines to crawl over.

Alas, good gardeners do not go away on holidays. I went away for another, brief week, but even this was too much for my little melons. When I came back they were on their last legs.

This year, I have had my holidays early; I am about to invest in another pack of melon seeds...

Ref: The Victorian Kitchen Garden with Peter Thoday and Harry Dodson. BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2000.