

Love Those WATERMELONS!

Every Bayou Stater's summertime memories are made of thumping, "busting," salting and savoring the sweetest treat that ever grew on a vine.

Text by Christine Smith
Photographs by N. Thomas Avant III

A shallow cloud of morning mist hangs four feet above a Louisiana field, obscuring the faces that accompany three pairs of jeaned and overalled legs—legs that now are stumbling and scampering over melon vines on their way to a section of fence whose barbed wires have been stretched permanently apart by many similar visits in the past—legs that soon will be crossed Injun-style on the floor of a clubhouse or tree house as these unrepentant culprits split and share the heavy green orbs of contraband under whose weight they are staggering now.

Later the same day, in the courtyard of an apartment near a major hospital in a city across the state, young interns and their dates giggle raucously as (preparatory to "operating") they plunge vodka-filled hypodermics into the firm rinds of watermelons from that same misty field.

That night, in yet another city, melons from the same sprawling field are scooped into dainty red balls and piled high on silver and crystal serving pieces, there to be toothpicked by elegantly dressed party-goers in the

midst of the evening's subdued music and polite conversations.

It's summertime in Louisiana, and summertime is watermelon time.

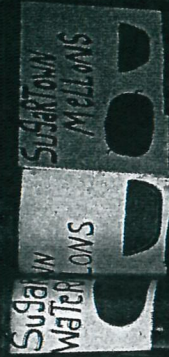
Mark Twain once described watermelon as "Chief of the world's luxuries . . . When one has tasted it, he knows what angels eat." And beyond angelic preferences, there's the patriotic aspect: the Fourth of July, without watermelon, would be like Christmas without Santa.

Usually thought of as a humble, even plebeian citizen of the world of agricultural products—thanks in part to the stereotypical Rockwellian scene of small boys swiping a few melons from an irate farmer—the watermelon has been quietly rising in stature to become an important crop indeed—a million-dollar product that, while not a necessity, is heralded by the public as economical, relatively low in calories, unquestionably delicious and readily available.

Spotted throughout Louisiana in parishes where well-drained, sandy, loamy soil permits maximum growth, from early summer into the late fall season, the ripe green melons roll to market at fruit stands, supermarkets

and, often, direct to the consumer from the back of a farmer's pickup truck parked beneath the shade of a tree at roadside.

In a market that depends on seasonal consumption, competition can become intense. In Beauregard Parish, for instance, the 1988 yield from 250 acres was \$200,000, down from the 1985 production of \$400,000 due to weather conditions. Sugartown Melons grown amid the piney woods of Beauregard have become a special treat for melon connoisseurs, and "Sugartown Melon" signs have appeared from the Gulf of Mexico to Shreveport as the popularity of these melons has continued to increase. They have become so popular, in fact, that "counterfeit melons" now are being sold. "It's



fact," says one irate citizen of Sugartown. "Signs go up saying 'Sugartown Melons' when they're not even ripe here yet."

While melons often are shipped in from Texas, one of the three largest producers in the United States, the demand for local melons is high in Louisiana, with each area favoring its own "home-grown" variety.

In Bayou Chicot, an Evangeline Parish community near Ville Platte, watermelons have been grown in the reddish, sandy soil since before the Civil War and are claimed to be the "sweetest watermelons this side of heaven."

In Farmerville, where the Louisiana Watermelon Festival has been held the last weekend in July for the past 25 years, they no longer grow the large

crops of watermelons that were produced there in the past. Most of the growers are "back-yard farmers" now, "but," they all agree, "we still have the tastiest melons anywhere."

Franklinton growers can offer positive proof—their prize ribbons—that *their* melons are the biggest, sweetest and best overall, having been the winners of awards from several categories at both the Farmerville festival and their own Franklinton Watermelon Festival.

Watermelon was naturalized in the Middle East and in Russia long before recorded history. The Moors took watermelon to southern Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, and European colonists in turn brought

it to the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific Islands. The Chinese began to cultivate the fruit in perhaps the 10th century A.D. Watermelon grows wild in Africa, and many historians believe the seeds were brought to America by slaves who could carry little else from their native land.

Scattered across Louisiana, watermelon growth is sporadic. While soil conditions in one parish might be perfectly suited to melon cultivation, nearby parishes might have an entirely different, completely unsuitable type of soil. Washington Parish in 1985 produced 800 acres commercially, for example, while nearby St. Charles Parish grew only one acre and many others in the vicinity had none at all.

According to LSU Co-operative Ex-



tension Service horticulturist Mike Cannon, there are two predominant varieties grown statewide. The Jubilee, a long, striped melon, represents about 75 percent of the melons grown in Louisiana, he says, with about 15 percent being the Charleston Gray, a long, light-green variety. Some growers like the Royal Sweet, a hybrid, which is smaller than the Jubilee but gives good production and is resistant to disease. Each grower has his favorite, and there are many other varieties that do well. "What we're hoping to accomplish in the breeding program," says Mike, "is to develop melons that combine good eating with optimum disease resistance."

It's usually the region of a watermelon's origin rather than its particular variety, however, that captures the attention and eventually the affection of the public. In the 1950s, for instance, when gentleman-farmer Dossie Montgomery drove his familiar, melon-laden pickup through the Kisatchie woods and on through villages like Provençal and Coldwater to Natchitoches for an afternoon of visiting and selling, he was the proud bearer of locally beloved "Salines." Untold varieties of melons, however, were called Salines by untold numbers of farmers in those

days, all named in honor of the Bienville Parish railroad town of Saline, which, like Choudrant in Lincoln Parish and Calhoun in Ouachita Parish, was a prime shipping point for Louisiana melons heading north to Yankee wholesalers. Likewise, any variety grown in Sugartown soil today becomes a "Sugartown Melon," with all the rights and privileges thereto appertaining.

Sugartown, now little more than a country crossroads in Beauregard Parish, was one of the oldest settlements in the original Calcasieu Parish, and the town takes its greatest pride in the watermelons grown there.

For many years three men, Winfred Moses, Milford Lacy and W.L. Lewis have been recognized as the largest pro-



Watermelons don't just happen. With help from

Co-operative Extension

Service scientists, dedicated

farmers like "White

Melon" grower Winfred Moses

(left) and W.L. Lewis

(right photo, center) of

Sugartown take years to

develop and select the sweetest

and heartiest varieties.



ducers of Sugartown melons and are considered the local "melon experts."

Winfred has been growing watermelons most of his life, and, in fact, he is one of the original farmers who "several years back" organized a co-op to assist all the growers in selling their crops. "For a while it worked pretty well," he remembers. "We printed a seal that assured buyers they were getting genuine Sugartown Melons. It wasn't long, though, until the seals were copied or obtained by outside growers, and pretty soon they were showing up on melons even over in Texas."

Winfred also has produced a "White Melon" (so called because of its almost white rind color), which he believes ships better than other melons because of a tougher rind, does not sunburn as

badly as some varieties, has a fine-textured, tender meat and produces many melons per vine.

Developing a new variety of melon that will produce consistent seed is not a simple matter, he recalls. After finding a "freak watermelon" growing in one of his fields, Winfred decided to save the seed. He began planting these unusual white melon seeds in an isolated field to avoid cross-pollination with other watermelons. "It took six or seven years of repeated planting," he remembers, "and during this time we had some really strange looking vines and melons." Finally, however, in 1962, the melons were consistent in size and color and Winfred considered the seed "pure" enough to send to the LSU Experimental Station at Monroe. After



they raised three crops in Monroe, "certified seed" was returned to Winfred Moses. The whites average about 35 pounds but can grow as large as 60 pounds, he says, and the meat is dark red and very sweet.

Like all the watermelon farmers, he believes that "When you say Sugartown Melons, it means the best. It's just something that's there, I guess, and not anywhere else."

Milford Lacy and his 17-year-old son Lloyd represent the third and fourth generations to grow and sell Sugartown watermelons and operate their little family stand at Sugartown's crossroads. "Grandpa Lacy and other settlers around the area first raised watermelons for home use," Milford recalls. "Then they began to plant their crops at different

times and trade off so they would have melons all through the summer. Some people that didn't grow melons would trade chickens or other things, and gradually as people would come out from town to buy them, the farmers began to grow them to sell."

In the past the Lacys have grown as many as 300 acres, but last year, because of bad weather conditions, they only had 50 acres. "First it was a very dry spring," he says. "That was followed by a wet, early summer, and the seeds rotted in the ground or just didn't come up. It was a bad year all around."

"We can raise almost any variety of melon here," says Milford, "but most farmers like the Jubilee or the Charleston Gray. They're good melons and they ship well."

One problem that growers often encounter, Milford says, is that there isn't much "new ground" left for planting. "New ground," he explains, is ground that has been left fallow for at least five years, then cleared again for melons.

"We raise good melons here," says Milford with pride. "No doubt about it . . . but," he continues with a twinkle in his eye, "it's the word sugar that makes people automatically think 'sweet.' That's what makes the reputation, and that's the secret of Sugartown Melons."

W.L. Lewis of Sugartown raises several hundred acres of melons each year. "Unlike most crops that are harvested with machinery, watermelons have to be picked and moved by hand," he says. "Each melon is 50 pounds or more, and that can get pretty heavy





The ancient and noble sport of seed-spittin' becomes serious business at the Louisiana Watermelon Festival's official spit-off in the Union Parish town of Farmerville.

by the end of a day."

Pickers and trucks arrive early at a field to begin a day's work. Each melon is pulled from the vine, and tossed to a waiting man on the back of the truck who catches and carefully places each one before turning to catch the next one up. "Sometimes we miss," says W.L. with a laugh, "but not too often. That watermelon is *heavy*; it can knock a man down if he isn't ready for it."

Sometimes unexpected dangers await in the watermelon patch. Winfred

Moses recalls crossing paths with an occasional snake, but he says the snakes are not as big a problem as black widow spiders: "In some fields there's a spider under every melon, and they can be just as deadly as a rattlesnake."

And there are other problems lurking in the watermelon patch. "Varmints," it seems, like watermelon just as much as their two-legged adversaries, and these critters of the wild are equally determined to have their share of this delicious treat. Crows, deer and coyotes are the biggest nuisances, and, some farmers say, they can ruin a field in one night. "A crow," says Milford Lacy, "will peck every melon in sight, then the deer will come in and finish them off. But they are not the only ones: raccoons, skunks, possums, wolves—anything around will eat watermelon. A raccoon will come in, open up a small hole, pull all the meat out and leave the rind intact. You don't know the melon's ruined until you pick it up."

"I lost 60 acres to deer last year,"

says W.B. Lane of Monroe, who's known throughout his area as the Watermelon Man. "About all you can do is just resign yourself to feeding them," he says. "They get used to about anything you try to do to keep them out."

W.B., who plants about 600 acres a year and whose father and grandfather raised melons in the area, says that small boys stealing an occasional watermelon is "the least of my worries." He remembers working a field one day when a neighbor came up with an old fellow and said the gentleman had gotten stuck and needed a tractor to get him out. "Well, of course I'm always ready to help anyone who's in trouble," says W.B., "so I got on my tractor and went with them. Turned out he'd gotten stuck in one of *my* fields, and his truck was loaded with *my* watermelons!"

In the "good old summertime," watermelons usually mean fun, food and festivals. The Union Parish city of Farmerville, not far from the Arkansas line, hosts the official Louisiana Watermelon festival, a title the city intends to keep despite the fact that Franklin grows the largest amount of melons in the state and holds its own festival to celebrate the watermelon season.

According to Ricky Morris, Jaycee president and chairman of the festival in Farmerville, "We represent the entire state, and any grower in Louisiana can enter any of the contests or events."

Mayor J. Carlton White was one of the founders of the festival in 1963. "At that time we had the opportunity to become involved in the Miss America Pageant but lacked the funding," he says. "The Jaycees were looking for a project and, since Farmerville at that time had a booming watermelon industry growing 1,000 to 1,500 acres that were marketed throughout the United States and even in China, the

Recognizing that watermelon is a nutritious as well as tasty treat, the Union Parish office of the Louisiana Co-operative Extension Service has made available the following recipes. Each recipe is a previous winner of the watermelon cooking contest held during the annual Louisiana Watermelon Festival in Farmerville.

LOUISIANA WATERMELON SHERBERT

- 1 1/4 C. water, divided
- 3/4 C. sugar
- dash salt
- 3 tsp. lemon juice
- 1 1/2 C. nonfat dry milk solids

- 2 1/2 C. watermelon pieces and juice, crushed
- 2 egg whites, stiffly beaten

Combine 1/2 cup water, sugar and salt in a heavy saucepan; heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Bring mixture to a boil, then simmer for 5 minutes and cool. Combine 3/4 cup water and lemon juice in a mixing bowl; sprinkle with dry milk solids, and beat until thick and fluffy. Blend in watermelon and sugar syrup; fold in egg whites. Pour mixture into freezer can of 1-gallon hand-turned or electric freezer. Freeze according to manufacturer's instructions. Yield: 1 gallon.

WATERMELON PUNCH

- 1 watermelon—about 14 lbs.
(approximately 10 cups juice)
- 2 pints strawberries
- 1/2 C. sugar
- 3 (6 oz.) cans lemonade
- Gingerale (optional)

Scoop out melon and remove seeds. Blend melon. Add lemonade, strawberries and sugar. Blend again. Chill. Add gingerale before serving. For a special touch, use watermelon rind as punch bowl.

festival developed from those reasons." The Jaycees continue to sponsor the event, and proceeds are divided between that organization and the watermelon growers.

"The festival is great for the community and the parish," May believes. "It brings people together and is good for the economy."

Serious contenders with watermelons for judging come from all over Louisiana to the Farmerville and Franklin festivals. They bring Jubilees and Charleston Grays, Black Diamonds and Cobb Gems, Carolina Cross, Royal Sweets, Crimson Sweets, Louisiana Queens and many lesser-known varieties. Each has certain qualities and characteristics for which it is recognized, but individual growers have their own closely guarded secrets for producing the best melon possible from their own favorite variety.

The melons are judged for size, uniformity, sweetness, color and taste. There are round melons, long melons, yellow-meated melons and even a story about some fellow who produced a square melon so it would fit into a refrigerator better.

Franklinton, in Washington Parish, holds its festival the second weekend in July each year. "We had been going to Farmerville for the past nine or 10 years," says Ann Thomas, president of the Franklinton Watermelon Association, "but then we all got together and decided to have one here. We still go to the one at Farmerville, though, because we still like to win awards up there."

The 1989 festival will be the fifth year for the Franklinton event, and the growers expect it to be even bigger than ever this year. "Along with our famous Washington Parish Fair, it's our most widely known and most eagerly awaited festival," says Ann. "We had 20,000 people last year, and we're

Young watermelon contestants come up for air, during watermelon festival competitions, but a veteran can stay face-down till a whole slice is history.

growing every year."

In Farmerville the year might just as easily be 1948 as the crowd gathers, children make mischief, political candidates shake hands and make speeches, the bandstand provides background music and men gather in small and large groups to discuss crops, weather and politics. Women tour the crafts booths; here and there a dog wanders, looking for a handout or unwatched food; contestants sign up for the various competitions.

Cleo and Ophelia White come from nearby Rum Center every year to join the fun. Others come from Texas and Arkansas, and one family from Louisville, Ky., plans a vacation around Farmerville's festival every year. "You don't find things like this in the cities anymore," they say.

As the competitions get under way at various locations throughout the festival, a space is cleared for contestants to line up for the seed spitting contest as one after another steps back, puckers up and spits. The seeds fly,

the spectators chuckle, and losers good-naturedly laugh at themselves as their mighty efforts bounce only a few feet. At last 11-year-old John Albritten gives a self-conscious heave and spits a seed 157 inches to become a winner.

Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but it's definitely not a part of the watermelon eating contest, where dozens of diminutive contestants simultaneously sink faces into melons and go to work. With the encouragement of spectators, the watermelons rapidly disappear until at last a happy winner

WATERMELON DIVINITY

- 2½ C. sugar
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ½ C. white corn syrup
- ½ C. crushed watermelon and juice

Mix ingredients and cook till temperature reaches 248 degrees. Beat 2 egg whites till stiff. Pour half of syrup into whites and continue beating. Cook remaining syrup to 272 degrees then add rest, beating the whole time, to first mixture. Add 1 teaspoon watermelon juice for added flavor.

WATERMELON SUPER SALAD

- 1 pkg. vanilla instant pudding mix
- 1¼ C. milk
- ½ C. watermelon juice
- 1 C. whipped topping
- 6 C. watermelon balls
- sprigs of mint

Mix pudding with milk and juice. Fold in whipped topping. Layer watermelon and pudding mixture.

Garnish with watermelon balls and sprigs of mint.

AMBROSIA FREEZE

- 1 (3 oz.) pkg. cream cheese, softened
- ½ C. confectioners' sugar (sifted)
- 1 C. dairy sour cream
- ½ C. watermelon juice
- ½ C. whipping cream
- 1 1 lb. can fruit cocktail, drained
- 1 C. watermelon balls
- ¼ C. flaked coconut, toasted

Beat together cream cheese and confectioners' sugar; gradually beat in sour

Continued on next page

cream and melon juice. Whip cream; fold into cream cheese mixture. Add fruit cocktail and watermelon balls. Spread in 9 x 9 x 2 inch baking pan. Freeze till firm. Let stand at room temperature 10 minutes before serving. Serve on lettuce leaves; sprinkle with coconut. Makes 8 to 10 servings.

WATERMELON HONEY

- 10 lbs. of chopped melon rind
- 2 lemons
- 2 quarts cold water
- ¼ lb. preserved ginger root
- 10 lbs. sugar

Pare watermelon and discard rind and all pink portion. Grind white portion through food chopper (course blade).

Combine watermelon and water. Cook slowly until melon is clear. Add sugar, sliced lemon and ginger cut in small pieces. Cook slowly until good and thick. Seal and store in freshly sterilized jars and cover with melted paraffin (as with jelly).

WATERMELON RIND SWEET PICKLES

- 2 lbs. watermelon rind
- lime-water made from 1 qt. water and 5 T. lime (calcium hydroxide)
- 1 qt. cider vinegar
- 1 C. water
- 2½ lbs. sugar (5 cups)
- 1 T. allspice
- 1 T. cloves
- 6 small pieces stick cinnamon
- 1 ounce green ginger root (optional)

Pare and remove all green portions from watermelon rind. Cut it in the desired shape and size and soak for 2 or 3 hours in the lime-water. Drain watermelon rind. Cover it with cold water and let freshen for 2 hours. Cover with cold water and cook for 1 hour, or until tender. Drain the watermelon. Cover with a weak vinegar (1 cup in 2 cups water) and allow to stand overnight. Discard the liquid next morning and make a syrup of the remaining 3 cups of vinegar, 1 cup of water, sugar and spice. Heat the syrup to 180 degrees (simmering). Cover and let stand for 1 hour so the syrup will acquire the flavor of the spice. Add the drained watermelon and cook gently for 2 hours, or until the syrup is almost as thick as preserve syrup. Let stand until cold, pack in jars and process for 15 minutes at simmering temperature.

is chosen and the losers go off with Mom to be cleaned up and await further adventures.

The highlight of the festival is the watermelon auction, with rows of giant melons awaiting the bidding. The largest melon last year weighed in at a whopping 167½ pounds and sold for \$1,100. "It's all for a good cause," says the auctioneer for the hundredth time, "so what am I bid for this next beauty?"

Wherever there are watermelons there is usually a discussion of "how to tell a ripe melon." Everyone has his own method—some work, some don't. "One thing for sure," they all agree, "you can always be sure when you cut the melon."

There's thumping, watching the "curl" or gauging the color change, and some even say they can do it by balancing a straw on top of the melon. If the melon is ripe the straw will turn with the melon, and if the melon's green the straw will turn crosswise.

Almost all growers say they can tell by the color of the melon. "It gets darker, the shine fades and it will look dull if it's ripe," explains one veteran. "A trained eye can see that." A few, however, hold out for the little curl that grows beside the stem. "When that turns brown, it's ripe," they vow.

Of course it's the thumpers who are most often seen at the local fruit stands, trying to decide which melon to buy. An experienced thumper knows the "expert way" is to place a hand against the melon and then thump with the other hand, feeling the vibrations of a ripe melon. An amateur can be quickly spotted using only forefinger and thumb. "That's not thumping," say the more experienced thumpers, "that's flumping."

There's no such thing as a watermelon stand proprietor who isn't an interesting character. You take Charley Smith. Charley doesn't grow watermelons, he just brings them to the customers. He sets up shop from the back of his old pickup truck, which he parks at the intersections of well-traveled country roads. "I just move with the shade, sell my watermelons, and my guitar keeps me company," he says. "I sell a watermelon and give a tune."

Mabel Thompson, a retired school-

teacher and area historian from Bayou Chicot, has grown watermelons for family and friends (and "a few to sell") for most of her life. "Miss Mabel," who retired from teaching in 1962, recalls the early days of watermelon farming in the area. At the first parish fair in St. Landry Parish, a pair of shoes was first prize for the largest watermelon. "Back in those days," she points out, "a pair of shoes was a mighty good prize to get."

She remembers many of the stories told about the days when money was scarce. "If you got a dollar for a watermelon in those days, before World War I, you was *some* kind of salesman. They just didn't see no money; there wasn't none to be had. They usually got 35 or 40 cents for a melon."

The best melon salesman in Bayou Chicot history, according to local lore, was a farmer who went out with a big load of watermelons and forever established his superior salesmanship. When he stopped at one prospective customer's house, the man came out to buy a \$1 melon, but all he had was a \$10 bill. The farmer did not have enough change and the salesman, not wanting to lose a good sale, talked until he sold the man 10 of his best melons and got the whole bill.

"In the early 1900s farmers all worked together to help each other," says Mabel. "Bayou Chicot was the only area in this part of Louisiana that grew watermelons, so they would all get together and form a 'melon train' to haul their melons to market at Opelousas, in order to help each other through the mud holes and bayous, or so that if a wagon broke down they would have some help. On some occasions water in the gullies would be so deep that the teams had to swim to get the wagons across, but when the melons were ripe they had to go to market, so the farmers, determined to sell their melons, went anyway.

"One thing hasn't changed," says Mabel. "Watermelon picked early in the morning is good. The best time to eat them is when they've been cooled by the damp ground with a good dew.

"And get that juice on you," she advises. "Let it run down your chin!"

It might indeed be what the angels eat, for Mark Twain surely wouldn't exaggerate, but the angels have no monopoly. Dig in! □

Some Beauregard Parish watermelon newspaper stories from the past.

From a July 14, 1967

American Press

SUGARTOWN —

Louisiana's champion watermelon eater will win his crown during one of the contests which will highlight the second annual Sugartown Watermelon Festival starting at 2 p.m. Saturday, according to Prentice McKellar, president of the Sugartown Watermelon Association.

Dave Pearce, Louisiana Commissioner of Agriculture, will deliver the festival address.

This year's event is serving as a dual celebration, with the association cheered by the "real good" sales of melons between June 10 and July 3, McKellar said.

"More than 60,000 Sugartown melons have been sold this season," he said.

Free watermelon will be served to the public, the president said.

Major features of the four-hour program, which concludes about 6 p.m. are: watermelon eating contest; largest melon grown here contest; weight guessing of largest melon contest; auction of the largest melon.

From a July 16, 1967

American Press

SUGARTOWN — It took a whopping big watermelon, 87 pounds, to win the title of "biggest" at the second annual Watermelon Festival Saturday.

C.C. Horton of Grant had the big one and it brought \$54 from H.I. Stewart of the DeRidder First National Bank when it was auctioned off.

Aswell Caraway's melon was second biggest, and Sidney Turner had the third placer.

Joe Coco of the state agriculture department in Baton Rouge topped the watermelon eaters in the senior age division. Cal Turner won the middle-age and teens division eating contest, and Susie McKellar was champ among the smaller ages.

Between 700 and 900 watermelon fans from as far away as Baton Rouge and Lake Charles attended the event, according to Prentice McKellar, president of the Sugartown Watermelon Association.



SHAWN MARTIN / AMERICAN PRESS ARCHIVES

Beauregard Parish farmers produce a wide variety of watermelons. "Sugartown" watermelons are defined as any melon grown with a 65-mile radius of DeRidder, the parish seat.

Free watermelons, about 500 of them, were served.

Dave Pearce, state commissioner of agriculture, was guest speaker, and entertainment was provided by the "Sugartown Sweets," led by Melvin Weldon.

Plans are already being made for the third annual event.

From an Aug. 1, 1976

American Press

SUGARTOWN — For the past seven years, two Sugartown farmers have been quietly cultivating what may be Louisiana's sweetest watermelons and at the same time, carefully guarding the world's only known seed source.

Burl G. Boggs and Winfred Moses have almost given up the idea of patenting the new melon which they have named Sugartown White, but are still toying with the idea of selling all rights to a major seed company for the right consideration.

The melon first showed up in a patch of Charleston Grays being grown by Boggs seven years ago. "I thought it was a citron," a hard freak of nature fit only for making pies," Boggs said.

Even so, the fruit's smooth, white skin attracted him and Boggs let it remain on the vine. When the white sport was finally cut, he was delighted with the texture and sweet taste of the bright red flesh.

Boggs told Moses ("The

best watermelon grower I know") about the white-skinned sport and the two friends determined to save the seed and plant them again the following year.

Seeds produced large crops of the same white-skinned watermelons with one occasionally showing the faint markings of its Charleston Gray heritage.

To insure pure seed and prevent cross pollination, Boggs and Moses had selected a site at least a mile from any other watermelon patch. The process of weeding out all but the best white melons for seed continued until the two men had enough seed to begin growing for the commercial market. "It was a lot of trouble and hard work," Boggs said.

"Finding a new site where watermelons hadn't been grown during the past five years was a problem. Finding such a site that was at least a mile from another watermelon patch was harder. We even had to clear up some new ground for the right patch once."

After the two men had several years of seed tucked away in the freezer, they began growing Sugartown White for the market. Some customers shied away from

the white melons at first because of its unorthodox outer coloring, but quickly overcame their prejudice after tasting the melons.

Moses said his crop of Sugartown Whites will be

ready for harvest during the first week in August. Too much rain has slowed ripening all his melons this year. He has about one acre of Whites and six acres of other varieties.

Raccoons, foxes, coyotes, squirrels and crows take their toll on his crop.

"Crows can peck a hole in a melon in a minute," he said. "Other varmints that have trouble opening watermelons finish them off. Coons make their own opening — usually from each end — then reach in to scoop out flesh. Coyotes and foxes bite through the rind to get at the inside."

Sugartown melons have long been recognized for their exceptionally sweet taste and fine quality, and command premium prices on the market. S.T. Self, Beauregard Parish County Agent, estimates the 1976 watermelon crop will bring in about \$100,000 for parish growers.

Because melons from this area are highly prized, growers are concerned about an unethical practice engaged in by some retailers who advertise earlier, out-of-state watermelons as being grown at Sugartown.

"Customers buy them in good faith and are often disappointed in what they think is a Sugartown product. It hurts all of us, but there seems to be no solution to the problem," Boggs said.

The secret of Sugartown's quality watermelon is its sandy soil and grower expertise. Farmers know, for instance, that they are asking for trouble if they do not allow land planted to watermelons to rest five years before seeding another crop. Wilt, the nemesis of every grower, remains in the soil and attacks new plantings for up to five years.

The long life of this disease has long been recognized and is being put to good use by LSU experts. A plot of land there had been planted in watermelons for the past 35 years. New varieties of watermelons are planted each year to determine their wilt resistant qualities.

"Our Sugartown White passed this test with high marks," proudly announced Moses. "If they can make it under those conditions, we don't expect any trouble with wilt if we follow a good rotation program."