

Bradford Watermelon | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

PRODUCT NAME

Bradford Watermelon
Citrullus lanatus v. Bradford1

CATEGORY

Fresh and dried fruit
Vegetable

COUNTRY

United States of America

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

The Bradford Watermelon is an oblong, dark green rind watermelon with red flesh and white seeds weighing 30 lbs fully grown. Depending upon the soil it is grown in, the rind develops longitudinal sutures. The form was first described in detail in 1860: "The rind is a grayish-green color, closely traversed by fine dark green veins; flesh varying from light to deep red, extremely sweet and tender, sometimes separating from the rind like the Orange watermelon; seeds white and small; size varying from medium to quite large. One great recommendation of the Bradford melon to me, is, that there is no danger of mistaking as to its ripeness. Whenever the tendril nearest the melon dries up, the fruit is ripe." Lowell Daily Citizen & News 9, 1207, April 4, 1860, 1.

Maule Seed Catalogue 1903.

PRODUCT TASTE

The Bradford Watermelon when perfected in the early 1850s benefitted from the textural crispness that was the hallmark of the Mountain Sweet Watermelon, while possessing the sugariness and nuance of the Lawson Watermelon. It was a superior melon for consumption as is. But its sugariness made it particularly useful for the manufacture of watermelon molasses. The boiling down of melon meat in sorghum evaporator pans was a common process in the late 19th century. Indeed, Col. William Duncan of Charleston, SC, and Jonathan Davis in Georgia manufactured commercial brands of Watermelon sweetener. They found, like present day commercial producers of watermelon syrup for snow cones find, that the taste of watermelon was so associated with summer that their molasses had a short sales season. Nevertheless, the Bradford Watermelon was the ideal rendering melon for summer molasses. [See illustration of 2013 Bradford Watermelon Molasses making in Sumter, SC]

Watermelon pickles process the edible rinds of watermelons as a condiment. The quality that most recommended a variety of watermelon for pickling with the tendency of the rind and sub-rind (exocarp) to become glassy or translucent upon long boiling at low heat. While the Citron Watermelon was bred exclusively for pickling, certain standard watermelons were considered worthwhile sources for pickles. The Bradford stood foremost among these in the American South. The recipe for pickling is as follows:

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Watermelon Sweet Pickles: Two pounds of watermelon rinds boiled in pure water until tender. Drain them well. Then make a syrup of two pounds of sugar one quart of vinegar half an ounce of mace an ounce of cinnamon and some roots of ginger boiled until thick and pour over the melons boiling hot Drain off the syrup heat it until boiling hot and pour over the melons three days in succession They are very nice and will keep two years. Barringer, Maria Massey. Dixie cookery; or, How I managed my table for twelve years: A practical cook-book for southern housekeepers (Cambridge, MA: Loring, 1867).

PRODUCT HISTORY

One of the three oldest surviving North American watermelons for which a breeding discipline and a standard configuration developed, the Bradford Watermelon came into existence in the 1840s and 1850s in Sumter, SC bred by Nathaniel Napoleon Bradford (1809-1882). Because of the promiscuity with which melons, squashes, and cucumbers cross pollinate and hybridize, the imposition of a breeding discipline has always been difficult for watermelons. Commentators on watermelons available in American markets prior to 1820 complained about the miscellaneous coloration, shape, and taste of the watermelons being sold. Hollowing of the heart, predominance of white under-rind (exocarp), dumpiness of shape, slushiness of the flesh and insipid taste led the list of faults. Watermelon breeding began in earnest in the 1820s and the first successes were in imposing regularity of form. Two watermelons—the Mountain Sweet and the Mountain Sprout (or Carolina Long)—established the ‘picnic’ or oblong melon as a standard form, while the Black Spanish and the Carolina Round established the compact round melon form. Of these early melons the Mountain Sweet and the Black Spanish survive. If you taste these melons in their present forms, they seem neither particularly sweet (both have about 5-6% sugar) nor crisp in texture. Sweetness and flavor came to American watermelons from a lost legendary ancestor melon, the Lawson. The Lawson was the parent of both the Bradford Watermelon (the South Carolina melon) and the Rattlesnake Watermelon (the Georgia Watermelon), the greatest surviving antebellum watermelons.

Of the Lawson Watermelon and its relation to the Bradford Watermelon. In 1883 Judge John F. Lawson of Burke County Florida related the story of the development of his namesake melon to a group of Georgia newspaper reporters: “My paternal ancestors were among the original settlers of Sunbury, in Liberty county, at which place my grandfather, John Franklin Lawson was a resident at the commencement of the revolutionary war, and during which he entered the colonial services. At the time of the capture of Charleston in 1783, while commanding a company near Charleston somewhere, he was captured by the British, and taken to the West Indies Islands, and imprisoned for two months. While on one of the prison ships he was tendered by the Captain (a generously bred Scotchman) a slice of watermelon, of which he saved the seed, and upon his return to Sunbury, planted them—from this seed the Lawson watermelon came. The particular variety was preserved pure owing to no other melon to be grown in the same place. My grandfather did so until my father, A. J. Lawson, in 1814 moved to Burke from Liberty, and bringing the seed with him, by careful cultivation, including the total prohibition of other seed on the plantation, brought the melon to its present great perfection. I presume the reason that it has never been cultivated as a market melon is that it was neither an early variety, nor a prolific bearer. Besides, it takes the most exact care and attention, both in the cultivation and the preparation of the seed before planting.” (Macon Telegraph June 30, 1883.)

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The Lawson by every account was the best tasting watermelon of the antebellum era in the United States, but it was irregular in shape, unproductive, difficult to grow, and prone to hollowing and available only to persons in Burke County, GA, or networked to Judge Lawson. One of Lawson's friends was the agricultural experimentalist John B. Jones of Burke County, who developed many market varieties of field peas. Jones conveyed Lawson seed to numbers of people, including Nathaniel Bradford and seed brokers Plumb & Leitner in Augusta Georgia. Bradford began crossing the Lawson with the Mountain Sweet to create the Bradford, a beautifully configured melon with Lawson Taste. Plumb & Leitner crossed it with the Mountain Sprout (Carolina Long) watermelon to create the famous striped Rattlesnake melon.

The Bradford became the important late season market melon in the South from the 1860s through the 1910s. The Rattlesnake was the predominant shipping melon from the 1860s through the 1890s, and remained a favorite garden watermelon well into the 20th century. The onslaught of fusarium wilt in the 1890s and the creation of boxcar melons with rinds so tough that melons could be stacked nine deep without crushing (perhaps the Kolb's Gem is the first of these rhino-hided melons in the mid-1880s) led to the supplanting of these superb melons. Since the 20th century flavor has been sacrificed for transportability and disease resistance in breeding. The last commercial crop of Bradford melons was planted in 1922 outside of Augusta, GA.

In the latter portion of the 20th century the various southern gardeners who kept the breed alive under its various names (Alabama Sweet, Pierson's Watermelon, Tinker, Hoke Sweet, and McGuire) abandoned it for the more disease resistant Kleckley Sweet heirloom melon. Finally only the Bradford family itself kept the stock alive—for eight generations, until Nathaniel Bradford in 2012 stepped forward to champion the restoration of this historic standard of watermelon quality.

HISTORICAL PRODUCTION AREA

Created in Sumter, SC., because of the efforts of the 19th-century agronomist William D. Brinkle of Philadelphia, Bradford Watermelon seed was distributed throughout the north in the 1860s. It was one of the standard garden melons grown in the post Civil War era throughout the United States. Because of the shorter growing season of watermelons developed for northern gardens by seed brokers in the 1880s, the Bradford became basically a market melon grown in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and to a lesser extent North Carolina and Tennessee. By the twentieth century it had reduced to Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. In Florida, a Bradford/Rattlesnake cross, the Florida Favorite, supplanted it in fields. By 1925 it was grown only in South Carolina.

FOR WHAT REASON IS THIS PRODUCT OR BREED AT RISK OF DISAPPEARING?

As of 2013 the Bradford Watermelon is being grown in only two plots—a 2/3 acre field outside of Sumter, SC, and a 1/10 acre field outside of Seneca, SC. Both are under the control of the Bradford family. Nat Bradford, the 8th generation namesake of the original breeder, has announced his determination to restore this classic watermelon to the regional table. He has sought the aid of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, Slow Food, and various local markets to insure that the Bradford Watermelon would re-emerge as an emblematic creation of the region's summer bounty. These efforts came to fruition in summer 2013. Slow Food Upstate's Chapter, the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation (Glenn Roberts and David Shields particularly), McCrady's Restaurant, and GroFood Carolina, enabled three hundred melons to be harvested, fifty of which were designated seed melons.

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The pulp and rind of the seed melons were rendered into molasses and pickle by Jeremiah Langhorne of McCrady's Restaurant. Field melons were sold in Charleston and Greenville, becoming the produce novelty of the summer. Numbers of restaurants featured it on their menus.

POTENTIAL FOR SUSTAINABLE HARVEST OR PRODUCTION SHOULD THE SPECIES REACH A STABLE POPULATION

Nathan Bradford, who is an ecological landscape architect by profession, has maintained the seed stock for the Bradford watermelon in biocide-free, non-irrigated fields. He is an avid critic of industrial farming. He envisions the return of his family's creation strictly in terms of sustainable practices. [See his personal statement in the testimonies section.]

IS THE PRODUCT FOR SALE ON THE MARKET?

300 watermelons appeared in two markets this season: the Growfood Carolina food hub in Charleston. <http://growfoodcarolina.com> and the Whole Food market in Greenville, SC. The shipments sold out immediately in Charleston once word of the reappearance of this legendary melon circulated through the restaurant community. Melons were selling at \$20 per melon. Nat Bradford indicates that he will begin artisanal production of molasses and pickle in the 2014 season.

NAME OF PERSON SUPPLYING THE APPLICATION

Co-sponsored:

Kristen Dubard, Chapter Leader, Slow Food Columbia

Janette Wesley, Slow Food Upstate

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

One of the most significant vegetables created in South Carolina, the Bradford Watermelon is a paragon of taste and utility. The story of its preservation by the family that created it is a testimony to the faith in quality.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

By Nat: I fell in love with watermelon, as most of us do, at an early age. I had the privilege of not growing up eating the standard supermarket watermelon, which tend to be more water and less melon. I grew up hearing my dad and granddad sharing their watermelon memories of our exclusive family fruit. Exclusive because only our closest friends and family, and a handful of devoted patrons, at the end of each summer shared in our modest harvest. I was schooled in the craft of seed saving, planting process, and tending. I was taught which traits and characteristics to seek in the field to find the melons for seed saving. Of course the final trait had to be savored to be observable. And should a watermelon possess all the characteristics, sweetness, depth of flavor, form, size, color, to name a few, then it would be qualified a Bradford Seedmelon.

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In a watermelon world where genetic bottlenecks have rendered-down from a rainbow of watermelon diversity to a green and white striped, red fleshed, and black seeded archetype, if any seeds at all, there is an immense need for a Bradford watermelon to expand the biodiversity. As I type this, this summer has issued close to 18 inches of rain in July alone in Upstate South Carolina. I have received reports of crop failure in the watermelon industry due to fungal outbreaks statewide from the unseasonably cool temperatures and heavy rains. Yet I am amazed that neither of my fields, one in the Upstate and one in the Midlands, is suffering from any of the fungal outbreaks. The Bradford watermelon has never been on the typical “life support” systems commonplace in modern conventional agriculture. Thus only strong, healthy, disease resistant and drought hardy plants were selected naturally and the weaker plants disappeared. This process of open pollination and natural selection over 170 year’s span has resulted in genetically strong vines with the ability to adapt on an annual basis to each year’s latest ailments.

Today modern agriculture’s model is a downward spiral, whether intentionally or unintentionally, which yields stronger diseases and pests necessitating stronger biocides to battle the onslaught, to the point that now unnaturally created Genetically Modified crops produce their own pesticides on the cellular level, and yet still the crops tend to lag a few steps behind the pests. The story of the Bradford watermelon is an inspiration for hope in the growing interest in sustainable agriculture. It is an excellent case study in the need for stronger natural genetics for the security of our global food supply rather than stronger chemicals to battle the ever evolving stronger pests. The answer is in the seed. All of the biodiversity is there to harness as the Bradford can attest to. Hidden deep within the DNA strands of our watermelon seed, contained in only a few small mason jars, is the ability to survive the environmental trials of the past, the present, and well into the future. It is time for our watermelon to be set free from our tiny family patches as it was once long ago. The strength of our seeds need to be available for infusion into our modern melons to reintroduce many desirable characteristics from the past now lost, as well as expanding them back into the genetic spectrum away from the bottleneck.

The Bradford watermelon is a flavorful piece of South Carolina history that shouldn’t be lost to the archives. It needs to be experienced and enjoyed by all today as it has been by our family for so many generations. The story needs to be shared to strengthen and encourage the support behind sustainable agriculture as the answer for the future. It represents all crops untapped, underappreciated strength contained not in the clever concoctions imposed in a lab, but in their SEED!

Finally, the Bradford watermelon has been a gift to me. I believe that gifts are meant to be given. With the support of the Ark of Taste nomination, it is the beginning step of giving to others to share in the wonderful joy that this amazing melon has brought to me and my family, and the assurance that this melon will not come so close ever again to the brink of extinction.

To the Ark of Taste Nomination Committee, on behalf of the Bradford family, I thank you for your consideration for the inclusion of the Bradford watermelon in your honored list.

Thanks,
Nat Bradford
Seneca, SC

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Additional Publicity:

<http://www.greenvillejournal.com/life-culture/food-drink/2429-saving-the-sweetness-of-summer.html>

<http://www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com/blog/tag/bradford-watermelon/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SlowFoodSouthern/posts/543740205684239>

<http://newearthconcept.wordpress.com/2013/07/19/lost-legendary-watermelon-resurfaces-an-article-by-david-shields-with-nat-bradford/>

<http://books.google.com/books?id=7z3nAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=Bradford+Watermelon&source=bl&ots=70f3fi3GUi&sig=Qmkk6K3wmMKwH2hKJXR5DFmeh4c&hl=en&sa=X&ei=zUM3Uu6vAo7G9gSPwoDAAg&ved=0CFsQ6AEwBjgK#v=onepage&q=Bradford%20Watermelon&f=false>