

Watermelon Berries

INDIGENOUS HARVEST OF THE MONTH

Eat More Alaska Watermelon Berries

Watermelon berries are a seasonal wildberry that grow all around Alaska in cool, shady, damp areas along the coast in Southeast Alaska north to the central Yukon River area at Manley Hot Springs and in moist, wooded areas of Interior Alaska. The berries are grape-sized, water-packed, faintly-watermelon, seed-filled treats often found while hiking in late July/early August.

Why Eat Watermelon Berries?



Usually, not enough watermelon berries are found at one time for a large harvest so snacking on a few as you hike is how most are eaten. Very little nutritional information can be found for watermelon berries except for they are:

- an excellent source of water,
- do note that the berries have a laxative effect when too many are eaten; this is how they got their nickname "scoot berries."

How Were Watermelon Berries Used Traditionally?

Watermelon berries were not traditionally used by the Tlingit, but they are utilized today in both the spring and fall times. In the early spring, the tender, young stems and curled leaves are harvested. The flavor is said to be similar to that of an English cucumber. People eat them raw as a trailside snack, add them to salads, and pickle them to eat later.

By the end of July and beginning of August, the plants develop red to burgundy colored berries that hang individually, one from each leaf, off the stem looking like a Christmas ornament. The berries are very watery but not very flavorful: faintly tasting like watermelon. The berries are plump and full of dozens of seeds, lots of water, and not much flesh. They are a welcome find on a long, hot hike! But beware of eating too many on your hike as they are also called "scoot berries" for a good reason.

How to Choose, Store and Prepare Watermelon Berries

Choose: Harvest young stems and curled leaves before they become large and woody. This will be in the springtime just after the cow parsnip. Harvest the berries during the Fall when they are red to burgundy in color and are full. Stay away from the wrinkled ones.

Store: Unless you are planning to pickle the stems and leaves in the springtime, you will eat all parts of the watermelon berries raw. Due to the high amount of water in the berry, drying is not an option for storage.

Prepare: Wash all collected stems, leaves, and/or berries in cold water before consuming, and then they can be eaten raw.

Harvesting Watermelon Berries

To harvest watermelon berry stems and leaves in the spring, cut the stems near the ground while they are still young and not yet woody.

To harvest the watermelon berries in the falltime, select full berries without wrinkles or bruising. The fruit will be about the size of a grape and very full of water. Select the berries when they are a nice red or burgundy color.

Raw Watermelon Berries Recipe

- Wash all the berries you collected in fresh, cold water.
- Eat some of the berries by just popping them into your mouth. There will be many seeds and you can remove them onto a papertowel or napkin.

Eating too many watermelon berries could have a laxative effect so please don't eat more than a handful.

Native Names for Watermelon Berries

Sugpiaq name:
Muuguaq

Tlingit name:
Tleikw kahínti

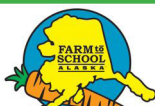
Unangaġ name (eastern):
Taangadgusin

Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina:
Licheq'a gek'a

Learning Activity

These berries don't taste much like watermelon at all. So, this activity will allow some creativity for the students. Since harvest won't bring in many berries, let the students bring the berries back into the classroom for a fun comparison activity:

- Have the following for each student - watermelon cube, a couple of blueberries, a grape, and a watermelon berry.
- Ask the students to try all the fruit and then ask them to name the watermelon berry.



For more information, visit the Alaska Farm to School website at:

<https://www.farmtoschoolalaska.org/harvestofthemoth/>