About – Cantaloupes are actually vegetables (the same family as squash) that have come to be considered a fruit. They are a subspecies of muskmelon. Originally cultivated in North Africa and Persia over 4,000 years ago, they were introduced to North America by Christopher Columbus in 1494.

Thanks to the availability of fruit from Central America in the winter, we are now able to enjoy cantaloupe all year long, however, May through September are the peak months to take pleasure in this fantastic fruit. Today, California leads the country in domestic production with Arizona, Texas, Georgia and Indiana also being important growing areas.

The varieties of cantaloupes grown in the Western states are slightly different from the varieties grown in the Eastern United States. Western varieties are adapted to arid desert conditions, whereas, in the Eastern United States, they are grown in more humid conditions. Western varieties tend to be firm and have a smaller seed cavity than many varieties grown in the east. One popular eastern variety, available in May and throughout most of the summer, is the Athena melon. It is a hybrid cantaloupe that lends itself to a longer time on the vine without getting soft. As a result, at harvest they are extremely sweet and flavorful yet maintain a firm flesh. They also tend to grow quite large weighing between 5 and 7 pounds apiece.

Selection – There are several clues to look for in selecting a ripe cantaloupe. First is the “slip.” The “slip” is the depression left in the stem end when the melon is picked from the vine. A full circular depression, or “full slip,” is an indicator that the melon was mature enough to virtually fall off the vine. Conversely, the presence of a stem indicates immaturity. Another test for ripeness is to apply moderate pressure to the blossom end (opposite the stem end). It should give slightly when the melon is ripe. The third indicator is smell. Ripe cantaloupe will have an unmistakable sweet, musky fragrance. Avoid cantaloupe with cuts, cracks, soft spots or evidence of mold.

Storage – Cantaloupe can tolerate a day or two at room temperature, but for longer storage, they should be refrigerated. Care should be taken that they do not get too cold as they are quite prone to freezing... 35 to 45 degrees is ideal. Once they have been cut, they should always be stored in an air-tight container in the refrigerator.

Preparation and Uses – Cantaloupe can be served in a variety of ways. The sweet, orange flesh can be cubed; sliced into wedges; scooped out using a melon baller; or served quartered or halved. It can be frapped and served as a cold soup or it can be processed into a juice. Preparation normally involves cutting the fruit in half and removing the seeds which brings us to the most important part of the process and the first step before you pick up a knife. Always, always thoroughly wash the surface of the cantaloupe with warm soapy water to remove any bacteria that could be carried by the knife from the surface to the flesh.

Nutrition – Cantaloupes are every bit as nutritious as they are delicious. A single serving (about one fourth of a cantaloupe) contains 100% of the RDA for vitamin A and 80% of the RDA for vitamin C. They are a high in potassium and are a good source for calcium and iron. Cantaloupes are low in calories, 50 per serving, and carbohydrates, 12 per serving.

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