

Growing Cantaloupes, By Doug English

Thinking of growing a plant that requires relatively low care and limited space, this veggie category is ripe for increased popularity. This article will cover the methods and materials used for growing the 71.6 lb World Record Cantaloupe.

I'm hardly an expert on these plants and that is why I think there is potential for much greater weights. This plant reminds me of Bushel Gourds when I had the record in 2014. Not many growers were trying them and much more knowledge was needed to max out its potential. Lopes are at this same stage. With the world's best growers trying them, I really believe that 80-90 lbs can be achieved.

The mother plant of the 71.6 lope occupied a space of 100-125 sq. ft. This creates a great opportunity for many growers to give this veggie a try. Lopes like a well-drained soil. I grew my plants in a raised bed that had 2' depth of sandy silt loam soil. This soil is amended with well-composted leaf mulch on a yearly basis. I incorporate mycorrhizae, molasses, Earthworks brand fertilizer called Renovate Plus (1-0-1) containing kelp, bone meal, greensand, zeolites, humates, etc. prior to setting out the plants. They are blended into the soil using a broad fork and a rototiller. This past season I also incorporated Milorganite into the soil.

Lopes need around 90 days from seed to harvest. My plants were started around May 15. 85-92 degree F is an ideal germination temperature. The plants were grown in pots for 2 weeks and transplanted on June 1 outside. By this time in the St. Louis region, we

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have warm weather and no chance of frost.

The 71.6 lope was harvested on August 23.

Getting the plants to mature for the fall weighoff is difficult in my area.

Fruit set will be on the main vine. Typically, the best fruit are pollinated around 2-3' from the

stump. The 71.6 was 3' from the stump. It interests me that I was able to grow a World Record when I allowed another fruit that was pollinated 5' from the stump to grow and compete for nutrients. This second fruit ended up weighing 44 lbs. Did I lose much needed weight for the 71.6 fruit or did it temper its growth from blowing up? Lopes can be lost due to splitting. Maybe the 71.6 didn't split because of the second fruit? In 2021, I will try growing lopes with one fruit and others with 2 fruit. The WR mother plant obviously could handle having 110+ lbs of fruit. This is why I think we will see 80-90 lb fruit in the near future.

The raised beds are blessed with all day sun and great air circulation. I think this helped suppress foliar diseases. We had a very wet spring this year yet I did not spray any fungicides nor insecticides throughout the year. I got lucky. Foliar diseases can be a problem. Some growers like to use a product called Miravis Ace fungicide to control fusarium and powdery mildew. I also like to rotate crops to help curb diseases. The bed that grew the 71.6 plant was last used for growing lopes 5+ years ago.

Watering was done in the morning as to avoid mildew problems. I also used composted leaves as a surface mulch. This was applied after transplanting. An 80-90% control of weeds was achieved and helped to moderate water loss during St. Louis' hot summer temps. One thing that I think I did wrong was not shading the fruit. However, the leaves from the vine did a pretty good job in covering the fruit when young. I will say the fruit was not overly ripe when it was picked. It was still 95% green only showing a hint of yellow on the skin.

When talking to Nick McCaslin who was the 2019-20 WR holder, he thought I picked it too soon. I was getting nervous about nearby groundhog activity. My last two attempts at growing lopes were dashed by these critters. I

picked the fruit knowing I lost some weight but I wasn't going to let the groundhogs ruin a good season.

Another thing that I might explore next season is vine burying. I did no burying of the vines for the 71.6 plant. Likewise, another area of experimenting could be vine pruning. Again, I did not do any trimming of secondary's nor main vine.

If you grow watermelons they can be a great guide when picking fruit shape for Lopes. You want to see uniformity of shape from the blossom end to the stem side. I really like the shape of the 71.6 fruit. It was very blocky, built like a tank. Most of the giant fruit that you see are more slender but much longer than my fruit. The 71.6 lope had an OTT of 155" (77" circ. + 36" W + 42" L). Avoid picking fruit sets 9

that have a fat blossom end but skinny stem area. It may take 2 weeks to see how the fruit is developing before culling.

I never really pushed these plants very hard in regards to fertilizing them. I love using organic fertilizers such as Neptune's Harvest fish fertilizer and Lady Bug brand: John's Recipe fert. (3-1.5-2) containing hydrolysed fish fertilizer, seaweed extract, molasses, humic acid etc. I did weekly fertilizing using ½ rates, slow but steady feeding. I love using compost tea made by WOW. I think using organic fertilizers helps keep my soil microbes healthy as well as my plants. Obviously, other growers are great at using synthetic fertilizers. I tend to avoid them as they are somewhat salty and detrimental to soil microbes.

Much thanks goes out to Danny Vester (2018 WR holder) for sharing his 65.9 lb. WR seed and knowledge. It is generous growers like him who help make this hobby such a fun one to participate in.

With growers trying different methods, we will see much greater weights achieved! Best of luck!!!

P.S. They taste great!