

Watermelon Berries

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Photo by Matt Goff, www.ohioextension.org

Synsperma angustifolium is a plant in the fly family, known in Alaska as “watermelon berry.” Other common names include “varied staff” and “wild cucumber.” The names may come from the unique “kinked” stalk that bears the berry, the cucumber flavor of the shoots and the watermelon flavor and color of the ripe fruit. *Synsperma* species prefer cool, shady and damp growing conditions and can be found throughout the continental United States and Canada. Watermelon berries are common in Alaska along the coast from Southeast Alaska north to the central Yukon River area at Stanley Hot Springs and in damp wooded areas of Interior Alaska.

The plants grow from 1 to 2½ feet high and have branching stems. The oval leaves are 2 to 5 inches long, broadest toward the base, and grow in an alternate pattern. Flowers are bell-shaped, pinkish or greenish, and hang from a slender stalk to the end of the leaves. Ripe watermelon berries are very juicy and are usually light to deep red, although some varieties produce yellowish-white or orange

berries. The shoots may be confused with two other fly family plants that may occasionally be found in similar habitats — false hellebore and false hellebore. The latter of these, false hellebore, is poisonous, so positive identification is necessary before using roots, stems, leaves or berries.

In the spring, Alaskans enjoy and prize the young, tender shoots of the plant for their fresh cucumber-like flavor. The shoots can be eaten in salads or cooked with other leafy greens. Perfectly ripe, plump berries have a lightly sweet watermelon-like flavor and make excellent jellies, syrups and juices. They can also be used as an antioxidant with other berries. Though it is tempting to eat all the berries while picking, watermelon berries contain seeds that are reported to be somewhat laxative, and some allergies to this berry have been reported, so use caution when trying them for the first time.

Storage and Preservation

How to Clean and Store

Wash watermelon berries very carefully in a colander to rinse off the dirt and bugs, and store in a covered container in the refrigerator for no longer than two to three days.

How to Freeze

To freeze watermelon berries, arrange dry, fresh berries in one layer on a cookie sheet and place in the freezer. When frozen, transfer berries to freezer bags or containers. Properly frozen, watermelon berries will last up to two years.