

2024 Florida Plant Disease Management Guide: Watermelon¹

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Specific Common Diseases

Alternaria Leaf Spot (*Alternaria cucumerina*)

SYMPTOMS

The fungus infects the leaves only. Lesions are usually round to irregular, dark brown or black, and frequently occur with concentric rings. Lesions of *Alternaria* leaf spot can often be confused with young gummy stem blight leaf spots because of the zonate appearance. The pathogen over seasons on old diseased plant debris. Spores are readily dispersed by wind and rain. Spores can be found in association with seed.

CHEMICAL CONTROL

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Anthracnose (*Colletotrichum orbiculare*)

SYMPTOMS

This fungus infects leaves, stems, and fruits. It is seedborne and the disease may first appear as a brown spot on seedling cotyledons. Leaf lesions are angular or irregular, dark brown to black, and usually with a narrow yellow border. Many lesions characteristically develop on a single leaf thus originating the term “measles” for this disease.

Lesions on the stems are usually deep and elongate while those on the fruit are raised with sunken centers. The spores of the pathogen are spread from plant to plant in wind-driven rain and are carried by people and machinery moving through the vines when they are wet. See *Anthrachnose on Cucurbits in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PP370>).

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Plant only anthracnose-resistant watermelon varieties. Deep plow plant residue and practice crop rotation.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Angular Leaf Spot (*Pseudomonas syringae* pv. *lachrymans*/*Pseudomonas syringae*)

SYMPTOMS

The bacterial disease affects both leaves and fruit. On the leaves, lesions begin as small water-soaked circular black spots surrounded by a yellow halo. The center of the spots may become white. As they enlarge, lesions may become angular in shape and coalesce so an entire lobe or even larger portions of the leaf are affected. This is a cool-weather pathogen. The pathogen is seedborne and seedlings

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may exhibit water-soaked lesions on the cotyledon while still in the transplant house.

On fruits, lesions begin as small circular water-soaked areas a few millimeters in diameter and enlarge with age to cover larger portions of the melon surface. Lesions do not penetrate deeply into the fruit. On large lesions the cuticle ruptures and peels free from the melon surface. Bacterial ooze may be present. See Bacterial Leaf Spot of Cucurbits (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PP376>).

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Use disease-free seed.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Bacterial Fruit Blotch (*Acidovorax citrulli*)

SYMPTOMS

Watermelon fruit develops a dark, water-soaked lesion on the top or sides of watermelon fruit approximately 2 weeks before maturity or later. As these lesions expand, they crack and develop a brown, scaly appearance. Additional fruit breakdown occurs. The bacterium causes small, angular or linear necrotic lesions on true leaves. These lesions are small and similar to those caused by downy mildew or gummy stem blight. No significant leaf loss occurs. Lesions in seed leaves become necrotic, but they typically are water-soaked areas on the underneath side first. The pathogen is seedborne. Spread within a field is by windsplashed rain, workers, or equipment. Wet conditions are favorable for disease development.

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Use pathogen-free, indexed seed and healthy transplants.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Blossom-end Rot (Calcium Deficiency)

SYMPTOMS

The blossom end of the fruit turns pale green to brown to black. These affected areas enlarge into sunken spots. The discolored fruit portion will shrivel into a dry rot unless the tissue is invaded by secondary organisms, which often extend the area of rot throughout the fruit.

This condition can result from a number of situations that limit available calcium to the plant. Poorly limed soils may suffer from a deficiency of calcium in the soil. Calcareous soils seldom have this problem. Dry soil can limit calcium availability to roots regardless of the amount of calcium present in the soil. Fluctuations in between wet and dry soil conditions, even for short time periods, can result in deficiency symptoms.

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Follow a program of soil testing and lime according to the soil test results. Supplement erratic rainfall with irrigation during fruit development to avoid blossom-end root development. Foliar application of calcium may help existing blossom-end rot problems.

Cercospora Leaf Spot (*Cercospora citrullina*)

SYMPTOMS

The fungus only causes symptoms on the leaves. Lesions are usually round, small, dark brown to black, with white centers, and encircled with a yellow halo that extends several millimeters wide. The pathogen over seasons on old debris. Spores are readily wind-borne and rain splashed.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Damping-Off (*Pythium* spp., *Fusarium* spp., *Rhizoctonia* spp.)

SYMPTOMS

Several soil-inhabiting fungi and fungal-like organisms that are almost universal in occurrence cause this disease affecting seedling watermelons. These fungi infect portions of the plant at or below the soil level, resulting in collapse and death of the seedling. Conditions unfavorable for rapid emergence of watermelons (cool, wet weather) are usually most favorable for this disease.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

Plant only fungicide-treated seed (most seed purchased is pre-treated). See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Downy Mildew (*Pseudoperonospora cubensis*)

SYMPTOMS

This fungal-like organism infects the leaves primarily. Lesions first appear on the crown leaves as yellow, mottled spots with indefinite borders. Older lesions are dark brown, contrasting sharply with the healthy tissue, and with only a small yellow border. As several lesions coalesce, the leaf curls inward toward the midrib and presents a “cupped hand” appearance. Under favorable conditions, downy mildew develops rapidly, resulting in a “burned-off” appearance over the entire field. The pathogen is spread rapidly by means of airborne and rain-splashed spores. The pathogen overseasons in southern Florida, and the disease progresses northward as spring watermelon planting proceeds northward. See *Management of Cucurbit Downy Mildew in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pp325>).

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

Fungicide applications will effectively control the disease if infection is diagnosed at an early stage. See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Fusarium Wilt (*Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *niveum*)

SYMPTOMS

Infected plants develop a progressively severe wilt syndrome. Sectoring of wilt symptoms on one or more runners can occur. The vascular tissue in the crown develops a brown to red discoloration. In severe cases, the entire root may become dark brown and a soft rot develops near the crown. The pathogen can be spread to new areas on seed or in soil transported by equipment, drainage water, and humans. See *Fusarium Wilt (*Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *niveum*) of Watermelon* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PP352>).

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Plant watermelon varieties with resistance to this disease. However, even with resistant varieties, it is desirable to use new land or have a maximum number of years between crops on the same land. On land previously cropped in watermelon, some wilting of plants can occur even with resistant varieties. Contamination of new fields with soil from *Fusarium*-infested fields should be avoided.

Gummy Stem Blight (*Didymella bryoniae*)

SYMPTOMS

This fungal pathogen can cause damping-off, crown rot, leaf spot, stem canker, and fruit rot of watermelon. Lesions in the cotyledons and leaves are round or irregular, brown and with faint concentric rings. Lesions on the crown and stem are brown and usually turn white with age. Lesions on fruit are brown, soft, nearly circular, and up to 4–6 inches in diameter. Lesions in stems and fruit may ooze or bleed an amber plant fluid: hence the name “gummy” stem blight. The pathogen is seedborne, spread by splashing rain from plant to plant and “over seasons” on old plant debris. See *Management of Gummy Stem Blight (Black Rot) on Cucurbits in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PP280>).

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Use crop rotation. Turn vines when foliage is dry.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

Plant only fungicide-treated seed. This disease requires fungicide applications to obtain adequate control. See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Phytophthora Blight and Fruit Rot (*Phytophthora capsici*)

SYMPTOMS

Any part of the plant can be infected by this fungal-like organism. However, fruit symptoms are the most commonly observed. When the roots of stems are infected, wilting of the plant will occur. A whitish mold may appear on the outside of the stem. The fruit rot will appear as greasy blotches on the outer rind. A whitish mold is likely to be present on the greasy tissue. This disease is most likely to occur during or after periods of excessive rains where water remained in the field. See *Vegetable Diseases Caused by *Phytophthora capsici* in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh045>).

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Avoid fields known to have had this disease because the pathogen can survive for many years in the soil. Provide for adequate drainage of water.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Powdery Mildew (*Podosphaera xanthii*)

SYMPTOMS

Initially, older leaves have a reddish-brown, bronzed appearance. The reader must realize that viral infections, chemical phytotoxicity, and certain nutrient deficiencies can cause similar symptoms. At this point, microscopic examination is required to discern if characteristic spores of powdery mildew are present. At some point, obvious white powdery fungal growth may occur. This has been an increasing problem in years that are drier. See Powdery Mildew on Watermelon in Florida (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PP342>).

CULTURAL CONTROL

None.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

See Chapter 7 of the *Vegetable Production Handbook of Florida*, “Cucurbit Production” (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/cv123>).

Rind Necrosis (Several bacterial species)

SYMPTOMS

Characteristic symptom of this disease is the development of light brown, dry corky spots in the rind that may enlarge and merge to form rather extensive necrotic areas that rarely extend into the flesh. There are no external symptoms of rind necrosis, but infected fruits appear to have exceptionally tough rinds in the affected areas. The means of dissemination of the pathogen is not known, nor is the etiology of the disease well understood, but apparently infection is limited to the fruits.

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Watermelon varieties differ in the relative incidence and severity of rind necrosis.

Speckle or Moonspots (unknown cause)

SYMPTOMS

This name refers to the development of small white or yellow circular spots on the leaves and fruits. The cause or causes are unknown but this condition does not appear to be typical of an infectious disease. It is heritable. There is no control for this disease.

Tomato Spotted Wilt (Tomato spotted wilt virus)

This disease has occurred on a few occasions in watermelon in Florida, but an adequate range of symptoms cannot be described. No controls are available

Aphid Transmitted Mosaic Viruses (Papaya ringspot virus type W, Watermelon mosaic virus 2, Zucchini yellow mosaic virus)

SYMPTOMS

The most common symptom is mottling of the leaf (alternate light and dark green areas). However, one or more of the following symptoms may also be associated with mosaic: stunted growth, abnormal leaf shapes, shortened internodes, “bushy” and erect growth habit of the runner tips, and mottled or bumpy appearance of the fruit.

This disease is usually spread by winged aphids during feeding. The aphids pick the virus up from weed hosts such as the creeping cucumber or melonette, *Melothria pendula* L., in south Florida or alyce clover (*Alysicarpus* sp.) farther north in the state. Virus transmission requires 9 seconds or less of aphid feeding on watermelon.

CULTURAL CONTROLS

No effective commercial control but isolation of cucurbit plantings by use of surrounding plantings of solanaceous crops (tomato, potato, eggplant, pepper) might be helpful in delaying initial infection. Elimination of wild hosts in the vicinity of commercial plantings of watermelons and other cucurbits is critical to the control of these viruses.

CHEMICAL CONTROL

For management of the aphid vector, see *Insect Management for Cucurbits* (Cucumber, Squash, Cantaloupe, and Watermelon) (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in168>).

Whitefly Transmitted Viruses (Squash vein yellowing virus, Cucurbit leaf crumple virus, Cucurbit yellow stunting disorder virus, Cucurbit chlorotic yellows virus)

SYMPTOMS

Early symptoms of *Squash vein yellowing virus* are difficult to detect and often not detected until older plants begin to turn yellow, the leaves droop, and the petioles turn brown. Mature watermelon plants bearing fruit will die. Fruit quality can be greatly reduced internally. The flesh of the watermelon may be pink to yellowish and off-flavored. There may be necrotic lesions in the rind.

Symptoms of *Cucurbit leaf crumple virus* (CuLCrV) are yellowing and crumpling of leaves. The disease does not appear to progress much beyond these symptoms.

Symptoms of *Cucurbit yellow stunting disorder virus* (CYSDV) and *Cucurbit chlorotic yellows virus* (CCYV) are mild and may resemble nutritional disorder or water stress. The first symptom is a yellow spotting of leaves and the veins remain green.

CULTURAL CONTROLS

Practices to reduce the number of whiteflies in the crop, such as not planting new crops near older crop fields, destroying the crop completely at the end of the season, and eliminating weed hosts, are recommended. For a complete list of recommended cultural control methods see *Recommendations for Management of Whiteflies, Whitefly-Transmitted Viruses, and Insecticide Resistance for Production of Cucurbit Crops in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in871>).

CHEMICAL CONTROL

For management of the whitefly vector, see *Recommendations for Management of Whiteflies, Whitefly-Transmitted Viruses, and Insecticide Resistance for Production of Cucurbit Crops in Florida* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/IN871>).