



ask

Celebrating 20 Years!
the landscape professional
Linda K. Lillie of Sprigs & Twigs

Welcome to my weekly series!

Email or mail your questions to: info@sprigsandtwigs.net or
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Thank you Readers for Voting Sprigs & Twigs
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Question this Week: *Lately, I have been seeing lots of seedless watermelons in the supermarket. I've been wondering, how do seedless watermelons reproduce if they don't have seeds? Thank you...Pauline*

Linda's Answer:

That is a great question. Plants can reproduce in several ways other than by seeds. Surprisingly, most fruit that we eat today (except citrus) doesn't come from seeds. One way strawberries reproduce is by sending out "stolens" or runners which are long roots that spread out from an existing main strawberry plant. These runners are capable of becoming new plants. In the case of seedless grapes, most commonly, they are grown from cuttings from existing grape vines that are dipped in a rooting hormone and planted. These cuttings are clones of the original plant. Using cuttings to grow seedless grapes has been around since Roman times! Seedless watermelons are a bit different. The seedless watermelon was first "invented" over 50 years ago and commercial production started about 25 years ago. Early versions of seedless watermelons lacked the sweetness and color of their seeded counterparts, but watermelon breeders have been steadily improving them so today they are of high quality. A seedless watermelon is a man-made hybrid that has 33 chromosomes. Since normal seeded watermelons have 22 chromosomes, creating a watermelon with 33 chromosomes took some doing. Scientists discovered that if they applied a chemical compound, Colchicine, which comes from the seeds and bulbs of Autumn Crocus, *Colchicum autumnale* L., to the early growth stages of normal 22 chromosome watermelons, they could create a seeded watermelon with



Autumn Crocus, *Colchicum autumnale* L.

44 chromosomes. They also discovered that if they took the male pollen from a 22 chromosome watermelon and fertilized a female flower of a 44 chromosome watermelon plant, the result was a seeded watermelon that had 33 chromosomes. When the 33 chromosome seeds grow, they produce the sterile seedless watermelon that we know today. Ironically, even though a seedless watermelon is grown from seed, it doesn't produce any of its own! It's easy to see why seedless watermelons are more expensive in the store!

Linda K. Lillie has been President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc. for the last 20 years. She is a graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, an accredited NOFA Organic Land Care Professional, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation projects..

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