Central State University Celebrates a Sweet Harvest of African Heritage Watermelons

By Cyril Ibe

Interim Land-Grant Communications Coordinator

Central State University is savoring the fruits of a unique agricultural journey—literally.

Last fall the campus celebrated the harvest of a rare and culturally significant crop: the African heritage watermelon, known both biologically and colloquially as Odell's White Watermelon or Large White Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*).

With its light-green skin, pink flesh, and white seeds, the watermelon is not only visually striking but also "sweet, juicy and overwhelmingly delicious," according to Clare Thorn, CSU Extension associate of Agriculture and Natural Resources and a key figure in the University's Ohio African Heritage Crops Research project. The project is a collaboration with Extension and the Agricultural Research and Development Program within CSU 1890 Land-Grant Programs to provide research that can be applied to farms in Ohio.

Brian Kampman, CSU Extension vegetable and small fruit technician, and Clare Thorn, examine a freshly cut African heritage watermelon.

A Watermelon with Roots in History

The watermelon's story is as rich as its flavor. While its origins trace back to West Africa, the variety grown at Central State has a unique American twist.

"This variety was selected by an unnamed man on a plantation in Pomaria in central South Carolina around the 1840s," explained Luke Farno, Ph.D., assistant research professor and crop-breeding expert. "He went into these melons and selected a few that were different. Thus, the Large White Watermelon was born."

Clare Thorn

Inspiration from a Sleepless Night

The idea to explore African heritage crops began with a moment of late-night curiosity. “Truth be told, one sleepless night, I turned the TV to PBS; a documentary on Percy Lavon Julian, a chemist, was on,” Thorn recalled. “What intrigued me was that he discovered a treatment for glaucoma by using a plant chemical from the Calabar bean.”

That spark led Thorn to research African American contributions to agriculture and eventually to the creation of a Black Heritage section within Central State’s Seed to Bloom Botanical and Community Garden on the Wilberforce campus.

Thorn’s journey culminated in a successful grant application to SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education), which funded the Ohio African Heritage Crop project. “Our grant was one of 39 submitted. Twenty-three grants were selected, and ours was one of them,” she said proudly.

Growing with Purpose

The project’s goal is to test the sustainability of African heritage crops in Ohio’s climate. “Will the seeds germinate, will the plants grow and make it through the growing season, will the plants produce, will seeds develop properly for sustainability?” Thorn asked. The answers to these questions will help determine whether these culturally significant crops can be grown reliably and even marketed by local farmers.

The watermelons grown at Central State were started in a greenhouse—this year on May 29. They were transplanted outdoors around June 23, with plans to harvest about 90 days later.

“Watermelons love heat,” Dr. Farno noted. “They also need moist soil, so water frequently is needed. If irrigating, they need 1–2 inches of water weekly, especially when fruit starts to set and is developing.”

The Deer Dilemma

But the journey wasn’t without challenges. In 2025, the CSU research plot was ravaged by deer, resulting in a near-total loss of the watermelon crop. “No watermelon was successfully harvested,” Clare lamented.

Dr. Farno added, “However, it seems at some point the deer lost interest and 20 orange-sized watermelons remained, but too late in the season to reach maturity. “Next year we will have to have some fencing up to help keep ‘Bambi’ away.”

Sharing the Sweetness

Thorn treated visiting members of the Black Indigenous People of Color Food and Farm Network to a tasting of the African heritage watermelon during their tour of CSU’s farms,

Botanical Garden and labs in Wilberforce in late September. A few days later, staff from the 1890 Land-Grant Programs held their own tasting session.

Lessons and Looking Ahead

Despite setbacks, the CSU crop research team remains optimistic. “We harvested two melons, and they weighed 18 and 20 pounds, respectively,” Dr. Farno said. “So, we can see that we can grow watermelons successfully here in Ohio, and they can thrive. Especially when critters are not around.”

The research project is slated to conclude in April 2027, unless extended. “Seed sharing from the Ohio African Heritage Crop project would be available to those interested after all reports have been finalized,” Thorn said.

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