



Growing Squash

From acorn to zucchini, the world of squash is a large family. We divide it into two types: summer & winter.

Summer Squash includes yellow crookneck and the famous zucchini. Most are bush type and can be grown in relatively small spaces including raised beds or large containers. You can sow the seeds directly in the garden when the soil has warmed and all danger of frost is past. Select a site with plenty of sun and a soil pH of 6.0/6.5. If you want to start seeds inside ahead of time, just give your plants a 2-3 week head start. Use peat pots and plant them pot and all so the roots are not disturbed.

Many summer squash blossoms are also edible. The plants will produce both male and female blossoms but only the females, recognizable with the small bulge of a baby squash forming, will produce fruit. Leave some male blossoms for pollinating though. Our cold, wet Junes have been hard on the squash crop the last few years. The good news is that summer squash only needs 50-60 days of warm weather so you can hold off planting or replant if you don't mind a late harvest.

Summer squash can be harvested when they are quite small and many cooks believe that is when they are most tasty. Anyone who has grown zucchini has gone on vacation and come back to find monsters lurking under the leaves but the large ones are just as edible. Do cut them off though; making those behemoths saps the plant's ability to produce more fruit. An old steak knife makes a good tool for cutting squash stems. Don't tear them off the plant; use a sharp tool to make a clean cut.

Nearly every old time gardener has a story in their past about planting too many hills of summer squash and delivering the surplus to neighbors in the dark of the night. Two or three plants will produce plenty of produce for a family of four and you will remain on speaking terms with your neighbors.

Winter Squash includes hearty favorites such as butternut or the huge Hubbard. These squash produce huge vines; many are capable of reaching 15 feet or more so plan accordingly. Because they take much longer to mature, and they must mature, they are not edible when young; we typically put out plants here rather than start seeds directly in the garden. Start your winter squash seeds inside 4-6 weeks ahead of our last frost date. Use peat pots to avoid disturbing the roots when you plant them, pot and all.

Depending on the variety winter squash plants don't produce the same kind of bumper crop their summer cousins can so do not harvest these blossoms for eating when they first appear. Once you have several squash growing on a vine you can cut off any new flowers that appear. This will encourage the plant to put its energy into maturing the squash on the vine.

Because winter squash sits on the ground so long to mature, mulch such as straw is a good idea. You can also use plastic or wood under individual squash to keep them from developing a soft spot.

You have to know how big your winter squash is expected to get to know when to harvest them. They do not ripen off the vine. Harvest all winter squash before frost hits. Most are very good keepers and will stay in a cool, dry place for several months.