

NEWS RELEASE

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Anne Schellman, Horticulture Associate, University of California Cooperative Extension

aschellman@ucdavis.edu

Squash in Your Garden

Most people who plant a summer vegetable garden incorporate some type of summer squash. Summer squash are easy to grow as well as cook, and contain many healthy nutrients. This category of squash includes zucchini, straight and crook neck squash as well as the scallop or patty pan squash.

One type of squash that gardeners might not be familiar with is the winter squash. Winter squash is planted in the spring or summer and harvested in the fall. The name “winter squash” came from the fact that it can be ‘cured’ and saved for consumption in the winter.

Winter squash have more than double the nutrients of summer squash and are full of fiber, beta carotene, Vitamins ‘C’ and ‘B’, potassium, magnesium, calcium and iron.

Familiar winter squash that can be found in the supermarket include acorn, banana, butternut, spaghetti and Hubbard squash. Squash connoisseurs recommend tasting various types to see what you prefer, and then choosing the variety to plant.

Recently I purchased an acorn squash and followed the easy instructions that came with it. There was a sticker on it that read “cut squash in half and place face-down in a bowl with ¼ inch of water, then microwave it on high for 8 minutes”. After cooking, I let the squash cool, scooped out the seeds and added a bit of salt and butter. The flavor was sweet and the texture creamy. I decided this was a squash I wanted to grow.

All squash and vegetables need organic matter in the soil, so mix compost into the soil before planting. Winter squash should be planted on small mounds at least 8 feet apart. Some winter squash are “bush” types, which need less space (2-4 feet) and are excellent for use in small yards. Plant 2-3 seeds per mound, and once the seedlings emerge and become healthy plants, thin to just one plant.

Winter squash need ample water, and should be deep watered using irrigation furrows. Deep watering consists of allowing irrigation water to soak into the soil to a depth of at least 4 feet. After watering, dig with a shovel to see how far the water penetrates. Sandy soil will dry quicker than clay soil and will need to be irrigated more frequently.

Although winter squash need deep water, their roots also need oxygen. Allow the soil to dry out between watering. When Central Valley temperatures reach 95-100°F, squash may need to be watered daily. Even adequately watered squash plants may wilt during the day at these temperatures, but this is only a temporary condition. Plants should return to normal by evening or the next morning.

Squash plants are monoecious, meaning they have both male and female flowers on the same plant. Pollen is transferred between the flowers by honeybees, although other flying insects do play a small part. Male flowers can be recognized by their long, slender stem, while female flowers have a small miniature fruit at the base of the flower.

When squash plants first bloom, many flowers will drop off. This is to be expected, as the first flowers are usually male and will not set fruit. When fruit begins to set, many of the small fruits will drop off, a normal thinning process done by the plant. If, however, no fruit sets, it may be a sign of another problem. For more information on disorders, pests and diseases of squash, see the link at the end of this article.

Harvest winter squash when the rind hardens and the skin takes on a dull cast. The skin should be hard enough that it can't be dented by a fingernail. If possible, allow squash to stay on the vine until the vine begins deteriorating. Harvest squash with a sharp knife, leaving a 2" stem on each fruit. Your harvest can be eaten immediately, or stored for later use. 'Cure' squash by leaving them in a dark place for 2-10 days at 80-85°F. Next, leave them in a dark place at 50-60°F. Acorns can be stored for 5-8 weeks; buttercup, butternut, delicata, kabocha, spaghetti and turban can be stored for 2-3 months; while banana and hubbard can last for up to 6 months.

Often gardeners worry that planting squash, melons, cucumbers and pumpkins in their garden will cause cross-pollination and result in an undesirable crop. Cross-pollination only affects the seeds of the crop being grown. Gardeners who save seeds to plant for the following year will need to review the species that can cross pollinate. A link to the University of Georgia at <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/L232.htm> explains the process of pollination and what crops should not be planted together.

Information on squash and other topics by the author can be found at http://cestanislaus.ucdavis.edu/Agriculture/Home_Garden_and_Ornamental_Horticulture.htm