

Squash: In Celebration of Summer by Bonnie Turnbull

Part 1 Start Your Seeds

Squash blossoms are so sunny and grand; they are a celebration of summer itself. Brighten your salad with them. So succulent and sweet! The vines are one of my favorite plants. Hand-sized, scalloped leaves cascade over the ground in waves, and then huge, butter-yellow blossoms pop out and grow into vegetables as fast as you will eat them. What could be more perfect?

Okay, I'll admit it. I am passionate about this plant Americans have enjoyed growing for 10,000 years. It is one of the easiest vegetables to grow here in Tahoe—even though all your neighbors will swear that you cannot grow anything so grand.

True, you will need to overcome a few challenges. Summer squash, whether zucchini or yellow, thrives on months of warm sunshine, fertile soil, and steady moisture, none of which sound much like Tahoe, do they? And just to get this out of the way—forget your dreams of growing pumpkin patches for your kids or harvesting winter squash for brown-sugared baking at Thanksgiving. Sorry. Those must fully mature and will be frostbitten long before they are ready.

Let's start with the months of warm sunshine. Since squash is the fruit of the mature plant, the more you extend the growing season, the more squash you will harvest. Since we only have about 40 almost-for-sure frost-free days in the Tahoe Basin, and our cold nights make slower growth than the seed packets promise, even the quickest-growing summer squash benefits from a jump-start on the growing season.

I plant them inside in late spring, usually when I find myself dispersing snow piles, so eager am I to get to that dirt. However, you'll have to resist planting your seeds before late April or they will be bursting from the pot before you can get them in the ground.

Choose bush varieties if you do not have much garden space. Choose vine varieties if you want to add volume and drama to your garden. Spreading is one of their great beauties.

Kids, and the kid in me, love to watch them sprout. They are robust little seedlings: tough and exuberant. Since you will only want one plant per vegetable-loving person in your family unless you want loads of blossoms to eat, your few seedlings will fit upon one south-facing windowsill.

So much has been written on starting seeds, that I will not go into detail here. However, it is worth noting a few particulars.

1. A packet comes with many seeds, but resist! In the end you will only select a few champions for planting.

2. They are warmth and sun-lovers, so you will need to supplement light and heat if you don't have a south-facing window that will keep them at 70-90 degrees F for 6 hours a day.
3. To get them started, I nest my pots inside the clear plastic containers baby greens come in so they have their own tiny greenhouses for consistent moisture and warmth.

You will have sprouts in about a week. Keep them moist and warm until after the danger of frost has passed. Planting in mid June is often a safe bet in Tahoe, but check the weather trend. You may even find that a little earlier may work out for you. Or take a risk on the early side, and be prepared to insulate them if we get a surprise freeze.

For an extremely detailed description of scientific seed-starting techniques, watch this three-part series, *Seed Starting*, by Colorado State University at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G45qswBqohQ>

But don't let the video intimidate you. You can be successful starting squash seeds in a paper cup!

Part 2 Planting Time

Seedlings do not survive the transition from the gentle climate of your house, to the extremes of outside without a little preparation. They will need to be "hardened off". Over a week or ten days, get them accustomed to strong sunlight, relative dryness and cold nights. I start by simply opening their window for several hours during the warmth of the day. Increase the amount of direct sunshine several hours every day and water less frequently without causing wilt. Since squash are warm season crops, I insulate mine with pine needles or angle salvaged windows over them for additional warmth. However, if hardened off, they will usually survive temperatures down to freezing.

Plant where they will get "full sun", six or more hours. Raised beds, will give them a faster start because their roots will be warmer in the early season. Five-gallon or larger pots can also do the trick, especially for the more compact bush variety.

Our environment can be brutal on plants so let's address the other concerns: soil and water. Though squash tolerates poor soils, you will be much happier with your harvest, and save water, if you improve the dirt. Mix organic matter, *compost*, into your soil to loosen it. Or, use purchased "garden soil", which already has a good ratio of organic and mineral components. The nutrients in our soils are not very available to plants, so adding a balanced, slow-release fertilizer will assure a steady source of nutrients throughout the growing season.

Keep the roots moist. Since the squash itself is primarily water, you know that the amount of water will impact your bounty. Drip irrigation is the best approach in Tahoe not only because it conserves water, but also because those big leaves have a tendency to mildew when kept damp. You will be happy you added compost to the soil

because it will retain water more in the root zone. To be confident that your plants are getting enough water, dig down into the root zone about four inches. If it is moist, your plants are fine and you should not worry when you see them wilting during the hottest, mid-afternoons. They will spring back when the sun goes down.

Another technique to save water is to insulate the roots from extremes of temperature and wind. Give your soil a covering or *mulch*. You may have sawdust, shredded newspaper, grass clippings or pine needles available. They work quite well. However you may prefer the neater look of a commercial bark.