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ADVICE TO GROW BY »
SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
What we love about heirloom squash and June in the garden



Heirloom varieties of squash generally need less water and can be found in a fascinating array of shapes and colors. JOHN BURGESS / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Question: My family enjoys growing a vegetable garden each year, especially squash. With further water restrictions likely, are there any benefits to growing heirloom varieties?

Answer: Absolutely! It's great that you are interested in growing healthy vegetables for your family while keeping the drought in mind. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in sustainable food-growing practices, including water conservation. There are many heirloom squash varieties on the market that are not only exciting to grow, but also require less water.

First, how can you determine if a squash is an heirloom variety? Heirloom squash include those that have a long history of reliable growth, reproduce true to parentage and have other qualities such as exceptional flavor or durability.

Squash grown for at least 50 years as open-pollinated plants qualify, but many have been cultivated for hundreds of years and passed down through multiple family or community generations. Because they are native to the Americas, finding a squash

variety that thrives in your region is relatively easy. With a bit of homework, you will find interesting heirloom varieties. Search for seeds online using keywords such as heirloom, drought-tolerant and dry farmed.

Although water conservation is a key benefit of growing heirloom squash, there are many others. Squash plants produce pollen that helps support your local bee population. It's not uncommon to see many types of bees visiting the open flowers. In fact, native squash bees are specialists and pollinate only plants of the squash family Cucurbitaceae, which includes melons, pumpkins and gourds. A pesticide-free garden can ensure a safe environment for these garden companions.

Heirloom squash are always open-pollinated. They rely on wind, insect, animal or even hand pollination. Seeds can be collected and saved from year to year if they are not grown near other types of squash plants. Plants grown from these seeds will be replicas of the parents and, over time, can adapt to your local climate and conditions.

Although large-scale commercial growers focus on hybrids that are easy to transport and store, heirlooms may show traits that give them unique character, such as thick skin and variable color patterns. These qualities are perfect for home growers as there is no need to ship produce across the country or grow a flawless-looking product. Heirlooms are a great way for gardeners to enjoy fascinating varieties not found in local markets.

Keep in mind the type and number of plants you want to grow. If you have limited space or are trying to conserve even more water, consider growing squash in large containers. A 10- or 15-gallon planter or grow bag provides ample space. Use well-fertilized soil and check soil moisture more often when you use small containers.

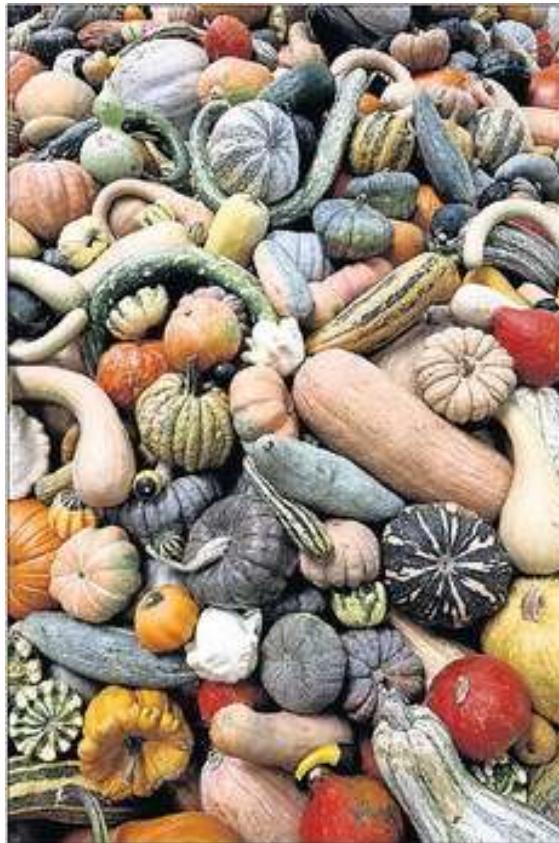
Squash plants have large leaves, and trailing varieties can spread out in the garden, so consider trellising long squash vines along a fence or other vertical structure. This can free up ground space for additional plants and make maintenance easier. Keeping young squash off the ground can deter pests such as slugs and snails. It also can help prevent diseases caused by excess ground moisture, especially after rain. The leafy canopy can act as shade for other garden plants. This can lower the surrounding soil temperature and help further reduce water use.

It's fun to search for new heirloom squash to try. There are both winter and summer varieties available. Summer squash, such as zucchini, tend to have thin skins and are generally eaten when immature. Winter squash, such as butternut, are grown in summer, too. However, these are allowed to mature and have thick skins that aid in long-term storage.

Allow 90 to 120 days from seed to harvest for winter varieties. For both summer and winter squash, look for varieties with fewer days to maturity to conserve water.

Some standout heirloom squash varieties include *Cucurbita argyrosperma*, known as cushaw. Typically grown in hot, arid climates, they are well-suited for areas experiencing drought or low rainfall. Try growing the popular striped cushaw varieties or the unique Gila Pima Ha:l. Although summer is just around the corner, if you live in warmer microclimates, there is still time to experiment with heirlooms this season.

For more in-depth information about food gardening with less water, go to the Sonoma County Master Gardener website at <https://bit.ly/3PigpOI>.



A tower of squash and gourds is displayed at the 2018 National Heirloom Expo at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa. Although water conservation is a key benefit of growing heirloom squash, there are many others. BETH SCHLANKER / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

June in the garden

June is a great time to mulch the garden, especially in a drought year. Mulch reduces evaporation, helps control weeds, moderates soil temperature and improves soil fertility. See the useful links below for more information on the benefits, types and application of mulch.

If you've planted your tomato starts, you will want to get them staked. This guide on the pros and cons of various staking techniques will help you decide which works best for your garden: <https://bit.ly/3wnWAwn>.

Check soil moisture and adjust your watering habits or the watering schedule on your irrigation controller accordingly. Water early, in the coolest part of the day, to encourage maximum water absorption through plant roots and minimum evaporation.

As the weather warms, aphid problems should lessen. Be alert for any remaining colonies and spray them off with water early in the day to allow plants to dry off rapidly in the sun, making them less susceptible to fungal diseases.

Deadhead roses and other summer-blooming plants for continued bloom. Cut blossoms for bouquets early in the morning. The blooms stay fresh longer if you quickly put them in a vase of warm water.

Harvest blooming lavender for indoor use. Bundle it up in bunches tied with string and hang them upside down in a dark, warm spot to dry.

Set yellowjacket traps at the perimeter of the yard — away from eating areas — to discourage them from visiting.

Feed azaleas, rhododendrons and camellias with a balanced organic fertilizer formulated for acid-loving plants.

Fertilize citrus with a nitrogen fertilizer according to label directions.

Useful Links:

Mulch: <https://bit.ly/3MeoBwY> and <https://bit.ly/3wnEzhI>

Mulch application: <https://bit.ly/3w7Zu9m>

Yellowjackets: <https://bit.ly/3bTACrp>

Fertilizing citrus: <https://bit.ly/34tAhrp>

Contributors to this week's column were Pat Decker, Pat Rosales, Debbie Westrick and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.