

Summer Squash

Summer squash is a tender, warm-season vegetable that can be grown easily in your home garden anytime during the warm, frost-free growing season. Summer squash differs from fall and winter squash in that it is harvested before the rind hardens and the fruit matures. It grows on bush-type plants that do not spread like the plants of fall and winter squash and pumpkin. A few healthy and well-maintained plants produce abundant yields.

The varietal selection of summer squash has changed in recent years and the number of varieties offered has greatly expanded as the result of new interest in gardening, hybridization and the introduction of disease resistance varieties.

Summer squash appears in many different fruit shapes and colors. The most common are yellow crookneck and straight neck, and green and yellow zucchini.

Summer squash can be planted anytime after the danger of frost has passed, from early spring until midsummer. Some gardeners have two main plantings - one for early summer harvest and another for late summer and fall harvest. Sow two or three seeds 24 to 36 inches apart for single-plant production, or four or five seeds in hills 48 inches apart. Cover one inch deep. When the plants are 2 to 3 inches tall, thin to one vigorous plant or no more than two or three plants per hill.

Well-drained garden soils produce excellent yields of summer squash. Use of a mulch will keep the shallow roots moist and cool and will allow for early harvest and increased yields.

Because summer squash develop very rapidly after pollination, they are often picked when they are too large and over mature. They should be harvested when small and tender for best quality. Most elongated varieties are picked when they are 2 inches or less in diameter and 6 to 8 inches long.

These larger fruits may also be grated for use in quick breads and other items. Do not allow summer squash to become large, hard and seedy because they sap strength from the plant that could better be used to produce more young fruit. Pick oversized squash with developed seeds and hard skin and throw them away. Go over the plants every day or two. Squash grow rapidly, especially in hot weather, and are usually ready to pick within 4 to 8 days after flowering.

Although summer squash has both male and female flowers, only the female flowers produce fruits. Because the fruits are harvested when still immature, they bruise and scratch easily. Handle with care and use immediately after picking. Be careful when picking summer squash, as the leafstalks and stems are prickly and can scratch and irritate unprotected hands and arms. Use a sharp knife or pruning shears to harvest and wear gloves if possible.

Squash blossoms are edible flowers, raw or cooked. Both summer and winter squash blossoms can be battered and fried in a little oil for a wonderful taste sensation. Harvest only the male blossoms unless the goal is to reduce production. Male blossoms are easily distinguished from the female blossoms. The stem of the male blossom is thin and trim; the stem of the female blossom is very thick. At the base of the female flower below the petals is a small bulge, which is the developing squash.

Always leave a few male blossoms on the vine for pollination purposes. There are always many more male flowers than female. Harvest only the male squash blossoms unless you are trying to reduce production.

To store summer squash, harvest small squash and place, unwashed in plastic bags in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. Wash the squash just before preparation. As with most vegetables, water droplets promote decay during storage. The storage life of summer squash is short, so use within two to three days.

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