

WINTER SQUASH

Squash is a rewarding crop to grow for both novices and experienced gardeners both; few vegetables produce so much harvest with so little effort. Squash originate from the Americas and adapt well to most soil types. All squash plants have both male and female flowers, requiring both to set fruits that develop to maturity. Winter squash take much longer to mature than summer squash, usually grow much bigger in size, and are adapted for storage through fall and winter. Most people store them for later use in baking, pies, or steamed.



SOIL PREPARATION

Squash prefer a sandy soil, rich in organic matter, well drained, and not too heavy. They also need full sun exposure. Before planting, incorporate 1-2 inches of well composted organic matter, Humic, and 1 lb. of all-purpose fertilizer (we recommend "That's all it Takes" complete fertilizer or Happy Frog Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food) per 100 square feet and work them in to a depth of 4-6 inches. Heavy, clay-based soils must be amended with compost and organic matter to encourage and allow for good root development. For best results, add 2-4 inches of a variety of different types of organic matter and 50 lbs. of Zeolite soil conditioner per 100 square feet each fall for multiple years to increase drainage and nutrient availability. By doing this yearly, over time you can create a better growing environment for your garden plants to thrive in and produce. Please consult our Soil Preparation Guide in the attached appendix.

PLANTING

Squashes can be successful from start or seed, it just depends on the preference of the grower. The seeds can also be sown indoors for starts 2-3 weeks before the last frost date. If planting directly outside, it possible to do it after the last frost of the season (which for Cache Valley is around Mother's Day). For earlier starts, use plastic water walls, row covers, or hot caps to protect against frost danger. Seeds should be planted with 4-6 seeds per cluster, about ½ inch deep and 4-6 feet apart. Squashes are commonly grown in "hills," which is not really a hill, but more like a depression that will keep the seeds and water contained in the same location, and for an easier harvest. After the seedlings have two leaves, you can thin them to 2-3 plants per hill, or leave them all to grow. The vines will spread out 6 to 10 to 16 feet depending on varieties, so be sure to leave at least 6 to 8 feet between each hill or row. Some squash come in a bush variety that won't take up as much space, usually 50-60% of a normal vine.

VARIETIES

There are so many delicious varieties of squash it is hard to recommend a favorite, but let us name a few. Delicata: This squash gets to be about 5-10 inches long with a white and green rind. The flesh inside is sweet and smooth, comparable to a yam. Butternut: People like the nutty, deliciously sweet flavor for pies and baking. Spaghetti: This squash is a different because the flesh is stringy and can be separated, unlike the solid flesh of the other winter squashes. Sweet Meat: Very similar to buttercup squashes, but much larger and probably one of our best keepers. Delicious nutty flavor, hard exterior rind for great storage life, small seed cavity and thick flesh that bakes, steams or sautes well. Other types include hubbard, acorn, buttercup, kabocha and banana.

WATER

Squash need regular water and consistent soil moisture to produce well. Use of a soaker hose, drip system and light mulches or weed barrier can assist in maintaining correct soil moisture and guaranteeing a healthy harvest. We recommend about 1-2 inches of water applied per week in 2-3 applications. Moisture fluctuations can cause problems with flower set, and poor yields. Maintaining consistent moisture will prevent early flower drop, proper pollenization, and assist in greater root development.

FERTILIZER

About 6 weeks after germination or transplant, apply a balanced vegetable food ("That's All it Takes" or Happy Frog Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food) around the base of each plant and water thoroughly. ½ to 1 cup per 10 square feet of area works well. For quick bursts of growth and flower production, we recommend using a water soluble fertilizer like Ferti-lome Blooming and Rooting or Grow Big from Fox Farm once per week for extra productivity. Just mix in water and apply to the leaves as well as the root zone.

We also recommend treating your squash seed or plants with beneficial microbes and mycorrhizae (Kangaroots or Myke). These added helpers bring nutrients and water directly to the plants that host them, making them stronger, more resistant to insects and diseases, and more drought tolerant. Don't go home without them.

COMMON PROBLEMS:

Anyone who has ever grown squash knows of the problems that can accompany this garden vegetable. Aphids, spider mites, blossom end rot, can all damage a squash crop. Powdery mildew, a white-patchy disease that stunts the plants growth and eventually will kill the whole vine, can easily be taken care of by Fertilome Fungicide 5 (organic) or Ferti-lome F-stop. If squash bugs are present, a once healthy plant will suddenly drop like it's not getting enough water.

The eggs, which are seen on the bottom of the leaves, are a coppery color. These can be physically smashed or removed. The bugs themselves are black, shiny, oval-shaped beetles; they sting the vine and stop the nutrients from getting to the rest of the plant. Spray with Hi-Yield Indoor/Outdoor Insecticide or dust with Hi-Yield Garden Pet and Livestock Dust. Organically repel bugs with Natural Guard Cedar Oil Granules.

SQUASH	
PLANTING TIME	Group D
PLANTING METHOD	Mounds
MOUND SPACING	3-6'
SEED DEPTH	1/2-1"
TIME TO HARVEST	90-120 Days
WATER NEEDS	1", 3x weekly
TRANSPLANT/DIRECT SOW	Direct or Transplant
SPECIAL ISSUES	Powdery Mildew Squash Bugs, Spider Mites, Deer Blossom-End Rot Cold

HARVESTING:

Fruits are usually ready late summer. The vines will die back, and the fruit skin will be hard. We like to harvest just after a light frost (28 and above) or just before a hard frost (27 degrees or less). Test the firmness of the skin, by scratching a line with your fingernail. If you can scratch the surface and a little moisture bubbles up, wait a bit longer to harvest. Once they are ready, cut the stem with a knife or hand pruner, leaving a 2-3 inch stem on the fruit. When storing, prep the fruits in a warm, dry location for 2-3 weeks before moving them to a cool (40-55 degrees) and dry location.

