

Squash

Squash is a warm-weather crop that takes more room in the home garden than most vegetables, but, given the right conditions, it outproduces other choices. Many new bush forms of squash are now available that you can use in place of the old-fashioned, space-taking vining varieties.

Varieties

Of the summer soft-skinned varieties, the most commonly planted are: 'Early Prolific Straightneck' (yellow), 'Zucchini Elite,' 'Ford hook Zucchini,' 'Cocozelle Bush' (green), 'White Bush Patty Pan,' and 'Scallopini Hybrid.' Fall and winter hard-skinned varieties include: 'Royal Acorn,' 'Bush Buttercup,' 'Bush Acorn,' 'Table King,' and 'Bush Gold Nugget.' 'Spaghetti' is a novelty variety that produces tasty pulp that looks like spaghetti when cooked and removed from the squash shell. When choosing a variety, consider space needed, days to maturity, yield, and disease resistance.

Planting

If space is limited, choose bush varieties only, or grow squash vertically on a trellis or wire. Prepare the bed with compost, peat, or well-rotted manure, then add commercial fertilizer. Plant squash in hills or clusters when the soil warms, spacing six seeds about 2 inches apart. A common misconception is that the soil must be mounded, but this is a matter of choice. The advantage of raised hills is that, like raised beds, they drain well and dry out quickly. Space the hills about 6 feet apart. In cool, wet areas, mulch with clear or black plastic.

Care

When the seedlings emerge, thin them to three healthy plants per hill. Apply a thick organic mulch around the plants if you are not using black or clear plastic. Water plants regularly. Use drip irrigation if possible; otherwise, flood the bases of plants with water to avoid mildew. Side-dress with fertilizer every 10 days for healthy growth. If vines get out of hand, snip the growing tips to encourage lateral branching.

Watch for borers, cucumber beetles, and squash bugs. Kill them with carbaryl. (Avoid using carbaryl during blooming since it kills bees.) Destroying cucumber beetles will help prevent bacterial wilt, one of the worst diseases in the squash patch.

Harvest

Summer squash develops quickly, so check fruits daily as they begin to form. Though certainly edible when large, summer squash tastes better and is tenderer when harvested while still small. Cut off zucchini and straightnecks when they are only a few inches long, and pattypan when no larger than a quarter. Harvest all fruits whether you can eat them or not. Give away or compost what you can't use. If you allow fruits to ripen on the plants, they give off a hormone that causes the plants to shrivel and die. Constant picking also stimulates increased production. Flowers of summer squash are edible. Choose the male flowers (those without small squashes developing at their bases; plants produce male flowers first).

Allow winter squash, on the other hand, to mature completely before picking it. Wait until the stems begin to dry and wither. Cut the fruits from the vines, leaving an inch or two attached to each squash. Do not carry squash by these stems. Place the squash (except acorn squash) in a sunny, dry location for several days, then move it inside to a warm, dry area for several weeks. This curing process allows the shells of the fruits to harden. Store them in a dark room at temperatures between 55 and 60 degrees. Store acorn squash, which can be eaten young or mature, according to taste, in cool temperatures from the start.