

Stretch the Growing Season with Winter Squash



Most home gardeners have already enjoyed the fruits of their labor, but some growers have managed to stretch the season by planting winter squash, which is harvested in late September and October. The best time for planting is late May, when the threat of late spring frost is over. Harvest winter squash after they reach their mature color and the skin hardens. Winter squash will tolerate light frosts but should be picked before a hard freeze. Many varieties, like butternut and blue hubbard, can be stored in a dry cool garage all winter. Sweetness and quality often improve if cured for 2 to 4 weeks in storage.

There are basically three species of squash: *Cucurbita pepo*, *maxima* and *moschata*. Native to North America and northern Mexico, *Cucurbita pepo* includes most summer squash like zucchini, yellow crookneck, and scalloped or patty pan, as well as winter squash like acorn and vegetable spaghetti. Leaves are generally triangular and highly lobed with hard, angular stems. The fruit stem is hard, strongly flared and deeply ridged.

Acorn squash have relatively small to medium-sized fruit and are heavily ribbed. Most have black-green skin with yellow flesh, although some varieties have yellow to orange skin. Vegetable spaghetti squash turns bright yellow when mature. The smooth, oblong fruit will weigh 3 to 5 pounds. When baked, the flesh can be pulled into strings and flavored with spaghetti sauce.

Another pepo favorite is *delicata*, a cream-colored fruit with dark green longitudinal stripes and flecks. The sweet orange flesh makes it excellent for stuffing and baking. The cylindrical fruit is 6 to 8 inches long and weighs 1 to 2 pounds.

For a one-serving fruit, try sweet dumpling, a teacup-shaped sweet winter squash. It's round with a flat top about 4 inches in diameter. It has ivory-colored skin with dark-green stripes.

Cucurbita maxima squash originated in the southern part of South America and include buttercup and hubbard winter squash. Leaves are relatively nonlobed with round soft stems. The fruit stem is round with an attachment at the fruit that looks cork-like in texture.

Buttercup squash is shaped like a small to medium-sized snare drum with a button on the bottom. The 3 to 5 pound fruit has fine-textured, deep-orange, dry flesh with a rich, sweet flavor. Sweetness will increase with proper storage. Blue hubbard is large, usually 12 to 20 pounds. It has tapered ends and a bumpy, blue green shell. The dry-textured flesh is mildly sweet.

Cucurbita moschata includes butternut and cheese types of winter squash. Originating in northern South America, the leaves are slightly lobed with angular stems. Waltham butternut is a popular variety. It can be stored for a long time and has a unique, sweet flavor and fine-textured flesh. A cylindrical fruit with bulbed ends, it averages 4 to 5 pounds and grows up to 9 inches long. Harvest the fruit when it reaches a tan color and the skin barely dents with a thumbnail.

Long Island cheese squash averages 6 to 10 pounds. The flattened, medium ribbed fruit looks like a wheel of cheese. Harvest when the skin is tan-colored. The deep orange flesh is moderately sweet.

Before choosing squash for next year's garden, sample some varieties this fall at a local growers' market.