

Squash (Cucurbita)



Full Sun



Squash

The squash are members of the large genus of annual, trailing or climbing vines which includes the pumpkins and gourds. A truly native American plant, the squash flourishes in practically every part of the country where enough moisture is available.

Classification of the various pumpkins and squashes is confusing since each species contains cultivars called winter and summer squashes and pumpkins. In the United States, winter squashes are those that are eaten when mature and that can be stored for several months.

Unlike summer squash, they have hard rinds and are baked, rather than boiled for table use. Pumpkins are orange, spherical winter squash. All species succeed in reasonably rich soil, although they favor a sandy loam. You will find them easy to cultivate.

Planting and Culture

Squash prefer a slightly acid soil with a pH of 6 to 6.5. A well-drained bed containing a supply of humus and rotted manure will produce healthy plants. Regardless of the condition of the garden, greater success will be assured if you add compost to each hill.

Squash seed should not be planted until all danger of frost has passed. Pumpkins should be spaced four to five feet between hills; running vines need ten to 12 feet. Six seeds to a hill covered with an inch of soil will be sufficient. Thin each hill to the two best plants. Pumpkin seeds remain viable for up to four years and one packet of seed will plant ten to 12 hills.

Where the growing season is short, pumpkin plants should be started indoors about a month before they can be planted outdoors. Squash roots resent being disturbed, so seed should be sown one to a pot indoors. Outdoors, set two seedlings in each hill. The first flowers of indoor plants which have been set out should be removed to encourage more fruit production.

Insects

The squash vine borer bores down the stem of the plant, causing the leaves to die off. To remove the borer, slit the stem lengthwise at the injured point. If the damaged stems are buried under a little soil, roots will set and new growth will begin.

The squash beetle leaves its eggs on the top and underside of the squash leaves. Eggs should be handpicked and crushed.

A box is an effective protection against pumpkin enemies. A wooden or fiberboard box, about 18 inches square and 12 inches deep, with no top or bottom, should be placed over each hill. Stretch a piece of cheesecloth over the top of the box and secure. Similar protection can be built with barrel staves or stakes.

Dusting with wood ashes may also discourage insect pests which plague your plants. Be sure to cover the stems and the base of each plant, two areas most affected by squash enemies.

Harvesting

Summer squash should be picked when the skin is soft enough to be penetrated by a fingernail. Remove all fruit at this stage, in order to keep the vines bearing. Pumpkins may be left on the vines until the danger of frost is at hand. Cut the fruit from the vines two weeks before frost and allow it to cure in the sun. If squash is damaged by frost, store it indoors for several days in a room where the temperature is at least 70°F. (21.11°C.).

Summer squash does not store well and should be eaten when picked. Pumpkins should be stored in a dry cellar. The best temperature for stored pumpkin is around 50°F. (10°C.). Check the pumpkin frequently for the development of mold. If mold forms, wipe it off with an oily cloth. If carefully stored, pumpkins should last until the following spring.

Varieties

Recommended summer squash (*C. Pepo*) varieties include the vegetable marrows such as Small Sugar; the summer crook-necks and cocozelles; pattypanns such as White Bush Scallop; and black and gray zucchini cultivars. Of these, crookneck and zucchini are preferred. Most varieties mature within 60 days and produce an abundance of fruit.

Among winter types (*C. maxima*, *C. moschata* and *C. Pepo*), the most popular are Blue Hubbard and Hubbard, Buttercup, Butternut, Mammoth, Quaker Pie, Turban, and the acorn types such as Table Queen. Most of these are good keepers if stored at about 45 to 60°F. (7.22 to 15.56°C.) in a well-ventilated place. Both winter and summer strains come in bush as well as vine varieties and there are several miniature-fruited cultivars.