

## HARVESTING AND STORING SQUASH

What's the difference between a summer squash and a winter squash? Summer squash, occasionally referred to as "vegetable or Italian marrow", is a tender, warm-season vegetable. (This means that it's sensitive to frost and grows best in warm weather.) Summer squash grow on bushy plants instead of vines. They're best when the fruit is harvested immature. They don't store well.

Summer squash can be stored up to a week in the refrigerator in a perforated plastic bag and that's about it.

Zucchini is a type of summer squash, along with yellow straightneck, patty-pan or scallop, yellow crookneck, cocozelle, and caserta. I believe the reason so many people don't really care for summer squash, like zucchini, is that too many gardeners harvest the fruit when they're too big and mature. You'll get the best flavor with tender, immature fruit with undeveloped seeds. I like to harvest the zucchini and yellow crookneck squash when they're only about six inches long. Patty pan or scallop squash should be harvested when they're only three to four inches in diameter.

Because these summer squash are so vigorous and grow so quickly, it only takes about 4 to 8 days after flowering for the fruit to develop. Plan on harvesting every day or every other day during the summer. You've waited too long if the squash is longer than eight inches and the skin is not tender. Harvest missed and run-away "monster" squash and throw them away.

Winter squash is also a tender, warm-season vegetable that often grows on a vine but, there are also bush types. Winter squash is harvested when it's fully mature. It stores well for several months under cool, dry conditions.

Butternut is a type of winter squash along with a

wide variety of other types including hubbard, buttercup, turban, banana, pumpkin, Boston marrow and Japanese kabocha. There's nothing like a steamed butternut squash for dinner on a cold winter day. It's simply scrumptious with a little maple syrup and cinnamon. Winter squash are the opposites of summer squash in that they're harvested only when fully mature. This is when the fruit has developed a hard skin and is a solid color. Most of the fruit on the vine will ripen all at one time. You'll want to harvest before hard frosts if you plan to store the fruit.

To harvest winter squash, cut the fruit off the vine leaving a two inch portion of stem still attached. Be careful not to bruise the skin. Allow mud to dry and then carefully brush it off. If you're planning to store them as long as possible, disinfect the fruit surface by sponging or dipping them in a 10% (1:10) bleach solution and allowing them to air dry. "Cure" or toughen the skin for storage by placing them in a very warm (80-85 degrees F) location for three to five days. Store them in a warm (55-60 degrees F), dry location. Good air circulation is important. Squash without bruises, scrapes, or frost damage will usually store for several months if not piled more than two fruit deep.

There's a third type of squash that are sort of winter squash but, they aren't long keepers. This group is the pepo group, short for Cucurbita pepo. This is the genus to which acorn, delicata, and spaghetti squash belong.

Pepo squash are characterized by a hard, ridged, five sided stem that flares at the base. The fruit also tends to be ridged, striped or both. When fully mature and freshly harvested, the flesh is a smooth texture and pale yellow in color.

Pepo squash do not need to cure before storage and

should not be cured. They will keep well for up to five weeks if stored in a cool (45-50 degrees F), dry location. Stored too long or under warmer conditions, the flesh will turn orange, dry, and stringy. The flavor also deteriorates with time.

Hopefully, this takes care of any doubts or questions you may have had regarding the harvest and storage of squash.