

Winter Squash

By Kathy Wolfe
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A native of the Americas

As fall comes into full swing, the memory of summer's warm days is replaced by crisp autumnal breezes, vibrantly turning foliage, and a stillness and winding down in the gardens. It is a time when our palates crave an earthier, robust fare, such as stews, hearty soups, roasts and root vegetables. Winter squashes add just the right touch to many an October meal and into the cold months to come.

Winter squash might better be called Fall squash because this is the time they are harvested and generally best tasting but, prior to refrigeration, they were one fruit (yes, technically they are a vining fruit because they contain seeds) that could be stored well into the frozen months. Winter squash is a native of the Americas.

European conquerors took the squash back to their countries and many varieties were created around the Mediterranean Basin, where the climate was warm enough for the plants to prosper. Wonderful varieties have been developed in Spain, France and Australia, among others.

The colors and varieties are so numerous that it is hard to believe they are all related. Colors range from white to yellow, and orange, green to nearly blue and mottles in between. Skins might be dimpled, warty, smooth or sleek. Cylindrical or round shapes come in varied sizes and the flavor might be nutty sweet and rich or thin and greenly vegetal. There are more than 350 varieties grown in North America alone. Some familiar ones include, acorn, banana, butternut, carnival, delicata, Hubbard, kuri, kabocha, pumpkin, spaghetti, sweet meat and turban.

Botanically speaking, winter squash, summer squash and pumpkins are all in the curcubit family, related to cucumbers, melons and gourds, and are different species of the genus *Curcubita*. The practical difference between summer and winter squash is the maturity of the fruit and how long it can be stored before eating. As the name indicates, summer squash is harvested when immature in the summer, have thin skins and can only be stored for a short period. Winter squash are harvested when mature and their thick rinds make long-term storage feasible. What we typically call pumpkins are cultivars of winter squash.

Winter squash is low in calories, fat and sodium, provides various vitamins such as A, B6 and C and contains dietary fiber and potassium. Additionally, it tastes great in so many dishes!

Harvest all types of squash before frost hits. They should be picked at full maturity after they have developed a hard shell (check this using your fingernail). The color of the skin should be

deep and vibrant, matte rather than shiny. The underside, where the plant rests on the ground, should be deeply colored, not green. Cut the stem 2-4" from the fruit using a sharp knife. If selecting squash at the market, check that the stem is present and is dry and not corky. If your squash is warm and wet, dry the surface and remove fruit immediately to a cool storage place to avoid the invasion by microorganisms.



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Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

All squash undergoes a slow curing process during proper storage. Artificial curing is not necessary for well-matured squash under good storage conditions. The best storage temperature is between 50-55 degrees F with humidity around 75%, about normal for garages or other suitable storage areas in the Pacific Northwest. Keep the fruit dry to prevent decay, fungi and bacteria.

Air circulation will help prevent moisture. Do not store fruit on cold concrete floors or allow them to freeze. Promptly discard any fruit showing signs of decay. Do not store near apples, pears or other ripening fruit due to the releasing of ethylene gas, which causes yellowing of the squash and shortens storage life. Store any cut pieces in the refrigerator. Refrigeration for a whole squash is too humid and they will deteriorate quickly.

Cooking methods will change the flavor markedly. Steaming results in a subtle taste and soft texture. Normally, simmering squash is not advised unless you are making soup, as the flesh will

begin to dissolve. Microwaving will allow you to cook squash whole, then cut it up to remove the seeds. Don't forget to poke it all over with a fork first and follow directions from a trusted source. The dry heat of roasting allows the natural sugars to caramelize, flavors to deepen and texture to become creamy and dense. Sautéing combines the best of moist and dry heat, allowing the exterior to caramelize but the interior to stay delicate. By sautéing, your dish will be done in less than 15 minutes, while roasting takes between 45-60 minutes.



Winter squashes are often eaten on their own simply with salt and butter. They go well with other seasonings, too, such as cinnamon, ginger, cloves and allspice. Some people add brown sugar, maple syrup or honey. Try them paired with savory fillings such as chicken with gorgonzola sauce, rice and vegetables, or Italian sausage with cornbread, leeks and spinach. Winter squashes can be added to stews, curries, casseroles, soup and even pureed into baked dishes. Enjoy experimenting with delicious, nutritious winter squash all winter long!

RESOURCES:

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