

Squash—Know Before You Grow!

by Phyllis Pugnetti

Squash is a simple crop to grow, but for high yields a little knowledge goes a long way. First off, pumpkins, zucchini, summer squash, and winter squash are all culinary terms that tell us how they are eaten. Botanically they are all squash, so growing information is pretty much the same for all of them.

Squash is a very warm weather crop that prefers weather that is consistently above 75°. Last spring, we had sustained cool weather for an unusually long period. By the time warm weather arrived in mid-June many squash plants had already died or were permanently stunted. Before planting out your seedlings, check the 10-day forecast, if it is for weather consistently cooler than 70°, transplant seedlings into larger pots and move them outside to sheltered warm place in your garden, or an enclosed porch or cold frame. Do not be tempted to plant directly into the garden too early!

Once your squash plants take off and really start growing, the race is on! The fruits need to ripen before powdery mildew, pests, or an early fall frost kills the plants.

Winter squash varieties that have shorter days-to-maturity may do better in Yakima. A variety that ripens in 75-90 days will do far better than those that take 110 days or longer. This doesn't mean you can't have the squash variety you want, for example butternut squash comes in many different varieties including Butterbush at 75 days compared to Waltham at 110 days. Butterbush will be out of the garden a month earlier than Waltham. In many gardens this may be all that's needed for pest and disease control. It may also allow you to harvest the squash, remove any diseased or pest infested vines, and still have time to plant a fall crop of beets, turnips, lettuce, or other greens.



Some varieties like Tromboncino can be eaten as summer or winter squash



Pumpkins, zucchini, summer and winter squash, all are botanically squash

Summer squash should be planted at the same time as winter varieties. However, summer varieties are harvested when fruits are very small, and blossoms are still attached or up to 5 days after the blossom falls off the fruit. You should have large harvests during June and July. When the plants start to show signs of disease or pests, pull them out. If you had planted more seeds in small pots about the first of June, you'll have nice seedlings that are ready to be moved into the garden for a second crop. The weather will be warm enough that the second crop will grow like gang busters, providing you with another good crop right up to frost. Summer squash varieties set far more fruits on healthy young plants that are growing vigorously, than older plants whose growth is slowing. If you require very

large harvests, you may want to look for varieties with larger fruit size rather than growing more plants. For example, Costata Romanesco zucchini will be 9-12 inches long while the blossom is still attached, whereas Dark Green or Golden will be only about half that size. Bigger fruits usually mean bigger harvests.

Growing squash becomes frustrating when powdery mildew sets in. You may hear of many homemade solutions, but beware, research shows that very little is effective against powdery mildew. If you grow squash expect to have this problem. Good garden practices will reduce powdery mildew and many pest problems. If possible, try to eliminate overhead irrigation, instead water at the base of the plant, under the leaves. Try to time your harvest so squash is



12 inch Costata Romanesco zucchini on a new plant in September.

ripe before powdery mildew becomes severe. Remove affected plants immediately after harvest and put them in the trash. *Do not put them in your yard waste bins!* Leaving diseased plant matter to overwinter in your garden will increase pests and disease problems throughout your whole garden. Maintaining a clean garden and rotating your squash crop to a new part of the garden each year will help to reduce most squash problems.

Growing squash is easy as long as there is warm weather and full sun, enough water, and fertile soil with lots of organic matter. For more fruits, plant blooming cover crops in among your squash plants. Buckwheat and agricultural mustard work well to attract bees and predator insects which will increase pollination, as well as reducing aphids, squash bugs, and other pests. If pest insects become a serious problem, you may need to resort to a chemical solution. For advice about effective products and their application call the Master Gardener clinic at 509-574-1604.