

Winter Squash

Squash is native to the Americas. Thought to be the first food cultivated by Native American Indians, squash, along with beans and corn, is part of the Indian triad of the three most important food staples called the Three Sisters. Beans and corn completed the trio, and without those foods for sustenance, many ancient peoples would have ceased to exist.

The Three Sisters were vital to many civilizations. The corn and the beans made a complete protein, the squash supplied beta carotene, Omega 3's and Potassium. Whole communities could survive on these alone if game and other foods were scarce. They were also one of the first Companion Plantings, each contributing to the growth and well-being of the others. The corn supplied support for the beans to climb on, and shade for the squash plants during the heat of the day. The squash plants large leaves shaded the ground, prevented weeds, and deterred hungry wildlife that didn't like to walk through the fuzzy vines. The beans fixed nitrogen in the soil to feed the corn and the squash.

Squash seeds have been found in ancient Mexican archeological digs dating back to somewhere between 9,000 and 4,000 B.C. The first European settlers originally thought squash to be a type of melon since they had never seen them before.

Winter squash comes in many varieties and sizes. Unlike its summer counterparts, winter squash is harvested at a mature age, which makes the skin hard and inedible. The skin, however, is protective and increases its storage life. Winter squash can be stored for 3 months or longer in a cool, dry place between 55° and 60°F. Because of this, they were eaten all winter long, hence the name "Winter Squash."

Higher storage temperatures will shorten storage time, but will not alter the flavor. Storage temperatures below 50°F (as in a refrigerator) will cause squash to spoil more rapidly. If the squash needs to be refrigerated, it can be stored for 1 to 2 weeks. Cut pieces of squash should be tightly wrapped and refrigerated. Cooked, pureed squash can be frozen for use later as a side dish or to thicken, color, or flavor soups, sauces, or stews

The yellow and orange flesh of the winter squash is more nutritious and richer in complex carbohydrates, such as beta carotene, than summer squash. Winter squash is always served cooked and, because of its tough skin, only the inside flesh is eaten.

Winter squash comes in a variety of sizes and shapes, from the over-sized Hubbard to the dainty Sweet Dumpling. We grow a number of varieties that you can expect to find in your share during the coming weeks.

Acorn

This acorn-shaped squash is one of the most widely available among the small winter squash. It measures about 6 inches



around and weighs 1 to 2 pounds. Acorn squash is a good source of calcium. Baking is an excellent way to bring out the flavors of this squash.

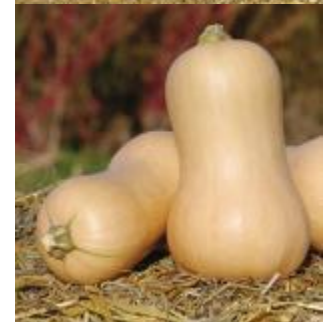
Buttercup

This stocky squash is 6 to 8 inches in diameter, averaging 2 to 4 pounds. Its popularity stems from its sweet and creamy orange flesh. Its shortcoming is that it tends to be a bit dry. Baking or steaming can solve this problem; the dry flesh becomes smooth and tastes similar to a mixture of honey, roasted chestnuts, and sweet potato. Even more than baking, steaming softens the flesh and creates a thick puree.



Butternut

This elongated bell-shaped squash measures about a foot long and weighs an average of 2 to 4 pounds. Its popularity is due to its meaty, yet moderately sweet golden orange flesh. Because of its thin skin, this squash can easily be skinned with a vegetable peeler, which makes it easy to cut and prepare. Baking enhances its sweet, moist, and nutty flavors.



Delicata

A long oblong-shaped squash with a cream colored, green striped thick outer skin and a golden fine-textured inner flesh. Considered as a novelty squash, its size may range from 5 to 10 inches in length with an average weight of 1 to 2 pounds. This is one of the tastier winter squashes, with creamy pulp that tastes a bit like sweet potatoes, hence its other name—the Sweet Potato Squash.



Hubbard

This tear-shaped squash comes in several varieties: green (true), golden, blue, and baby blue. It ranges from dark green to orange and weighs from 5 to 50 pounds. Because of its size, Hubbard's popularity has decreased over the years. However, pre-cut portions of green and orange hubbard can be found in markets. Green hubbards are thick, sweet, and dry. Golden Hubbards—a smaller squash than the green or blue—are fairly sweet, but have a bitter aftertaste. We grow a smaller variety of Hubbard that is a little easier to manage.



Kobocho

Kabocho is hard, has knobby-looking skin, is shaped like a squatty pumpkin, and has a dull orange or deep green skin with some celadon-to-white stripes and a n intense yellow-orange color on the inside. In many respects it is similar to the Buttercup squash, but without the characteristic cup on the blossom end. It



has an exceptional naturally sweet flavor, even sweeter than butternut squash. It is similar in texture and flavor to a pumpkin and a sweet potato combined. Like other squash-family members, it is commonly mixed in side dishes and soups or anywhere pumpkin, potato, or other squash would be. It is a common ingredient in vegetable tempura and can be made into soup. Kabocha is used in traditional Thai desserts and main courses.



Spaghetti

This oval-shaped yellow squash is also called the vegetable spaghetti. It averages 9 inches in length and may weigh 2 to 3 pounds. When cooked, the crisp, tender, spaghetti-like strands yield a mild lightly sweet and fresh taste. Keep in mind that the larger the vegetable, the thicker the strands and the more flavorful the taste.



Sweet Dumpling/Carnival

This solid round squash is a perfect serving for one person. It is about the size of a large apple and weighs up to 1 pound. The skin is a warm cream color or striped with ivy green, and it changes to butter color and orange during storage. The skin is relatively tender and can be eaten. The pale-yellow flesh is smooth, fine, and dry as a potato and produces a rich starchy, light to mild. Carnival is similar to Sweet Dumpling, but a little larger and streaked with orange. The flesh is also more orange than Sweet Dumpling.



Uses

To a certain extent, all of the winter squashes are interchangeable with the exception of the spaghetti squash. The darker the flesh, the richer the flavor tends to be. Acorn, Sweet Dumpling, and Carnival work well for stuffed squash recipes (you know—the ones with apples, raisins, brown sugar, and cinnamon). Because of their size, they are also a little more work to extract the flesh. Bigger squash=less work per cup of useable squash.



Though all varieties of squash are good nutrition choices, winter varieties tend to be more nutrient-dense. They generally contain much more beta-carotene and more of several B vitamins than summer squash. As the winter months have less sunlight, the Acorn Squash supplies valuable nutrients and minerals into the diet. It is very high in Vitamin A. Additionally, the winter squash provides, Vitamin C, Potassium, dietary fiber, manganese, folate, Vitamin B complex, omega 3 fatty acids, copper and tryptophan.

The Vitamin A component is good for men's health as well as smokers. Studies show that smoking cigarettes depletes Vitamin A in the system. Winter squash are abundant in the nutrient beta carotene—the darker the flesh the more beta-carotene. Butternut squash's beta-carotene content even rivals that of mangoes and cantaloupe. And that's a boon in the fight against cancer, heart disease, and cataracts. Beta-carotene prevents the oxidation of cholesterol in the blood vessels. Thus, no plaque develops to cause restricted blood flow leading to heart disease. Beta-carotene may also play a role in reducing lung inflammation and emphysema.

Winter squash is also rich in fiber. This fiber was once a routine aspect of all diets, and for the most part has been driven out by processing and modern taste preferences, but it is essential for digestion and has been found a preventive for various forms of cancer, lung disease and all around good health.

The folate found in winter squash may help to prevent certain birth defects if taken by women before and during pregnancy. Folate is also needed by the body to break down a dangerous metabolic byproduct called homocysteine, which can directly damage blood vessel walls. Since high levels of homocysteine are associated with an increased risk for heart attack and stroke, getting plenty of folate in the diet is a good idea. Folate has also been shown to help protect colon cells from the effects of cancer-causing chemicals. In fact, diets high in folate-rich foods are associated with a significantly reduced risk of colon cancer, especially in people who have a history of alcohol use.

Preparing Winter Squash

Peeling winter squash can be a challenge to the novice. The thin-skinned varieties (acorn, butternut, delicata and sweet dumpling) can be peeled with a paring knife or vegetable peeler.

Most recipes using these varieties call for cutting the squash in half. Position the squash on a cutting board, stem end facing you. Place the blade of a heavy chef's knife horizontally along the length of the squash. With a hammer or mallet, repeatedly hit the back of the blade near the handle to drive it into the squash until it breaks in half. Place the larger varieties (Hubbard and Turk's Turban) on newspaper and use a sharp cleaver to split the hard-rind open. Or use the chef's knife method described above. Once you have a slit cut, bang on a hard surface and pull apart. Pieces are easier to peel. With a spoon, scoop out the seeds and strings and discard, or set aside if you plan to roast the seeds. For instructions on roasting seeds, visit our website Pumpkins and More and substitute squash seeds in the recipe.

To cook winter squash, place unpeeled pieces cut sides down on a shallow baking dish and bake in a 350°F oven for 30 minutes or longer. Check for doneness by piercing with a fork or skewer. When tender, remove from the oven and allow the pieces to cool. Spoon out the soft flesh and mash with a fork or process in a blender or food processor. Peeled pieces can be cut into cubes and boiled until tender. Use with any recipe calling for cooked mashed or pureed squash. Or microwave the squash pieces on high for 15 minutes or longer.

Small acorn squash and spaghetti squash can be pierced in several places with a long-tined fork or metal skewer and baked whole. Piercing prevents the shell from bursting during cooking. Place the squash on a baking dish and bake for 1 ½ to 2 hours at 325°F. Test for doneness by squeezing the shell. When it gives a bit with pressure, it is done. Alternatively, wrap halved and seeded squash in aluminum foil and bake for 30-60 minutes in 325 degree oven or until soft enough to scoop out of the shell.