



Harvest of the Month

Summer Squash



Botany

Summer squash is part of the Cucurbit family and genus. The majority of summer squash cultivars are classified as *Cucurbita pepo*. Winter squash and pumpkins are also part of the Cucurbit genus, but are different species. Melons and cucumbers are part of the larger Cucurbit family.

Summer squash can either refer to a squash plant with fruit that is harvested when immature, or the fruit itself. The word "Summer" reflects their early harvest period and short storage life, in contrast to Winter squashes.

Social Sciences

Cucurbita pepo is one of the oldest, if not the oldest domesticated species. The oldest known locations of cultivation are in southern Mexico in Oaxaca 8,000–10,000 years ago and Ocampo, Tamaulipas, Mexico about 7,000 years ago. Before the arrival of Europeans, *C. pepo* had already been carried to all parts of North America where they could be grown by indigenous peoples. Today, China grows more summer squash than any other country. In the U.S. Florida and California are the top squash producing states.

Fun Fact

Patty pan squash is one of the oldest cultivars of summer squash. In the writings of early Americans, including Thomas Jefferson and Lewis and Clark, it was known as "simnel" (other spellings include: cimnel, simlin, simblin, symnel) because of the visual similarity between the squash and the simnel cake widely eaten in the UK.



Calabacín means zucchini in Spanish.

Nutrition

Summer squash is low in calories and high in fiber. The edible skin is a great source of Vitamin C, an antioxidant that helps protect your cells, supports wound healing, and keeps your immune system functioning optimally. Summer squash also contains potassium and magnesium which can help support heart health.

Growing Tips

Summer squash are tender annuals that originated in the tropics so they love hot weather. Wait to plant summer squash until the weather is settled and the soil has warmed to at least 65 degrees.

Planting

If you are planting seedlings it is extremely important to plant them while they are still small, 3 leaves is ideal. Squash have extensive root systems that must not be impeded in their growth. If they become at all root bound it takes them a long time to recover once planted, if they ever do. If the soil is warm it is much easier to plant from seed. The large seeds germinate quickly and will outgrow any seedlings planted at the same time. Most squash cultivars are going to need at least 2 square feet to accommodate their full size.

Care & Maintenance

Summer squash aren't particularly heavy feeders; an application of compost before planting should be all the plants need. They do need consistent moisture, however, to grow and set fruit well. It is best to do some sort of ground level watering as overhead watering can exacerbate fungal diseases.

Harvesting

Whether you are growing varieties with straight fruits like zucchini, yellow crookneck, or other shapes like round or patty pan, it is important to harvest the plants often and while the fruits are the appropriate size, if not on the small side. Harvesting often and harvesting everything that is ready will keep your plant producing for longer. Use a clean sharp harvest knife or shears to cut the fruits from the plant, leaving an inch or so of stem. This will help prevent moisture loss and improve storage time. The flowers are edible as well and are a popular dish in Italy where they are stuffed with cheese, battered and fried.

