

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Growing summer squash

QUESTION: What is the secret to growing the best summer squash?

ANSWER: If the thought of summer squash brings to mind images of zucchini and little else, get ready to make a new discovery – there are so many different types.

Cucurbita pepo is the sundry group that includes zucchini, scallop and crookneck squashes. A couple of plants provide plenty for a family to eat all summer long. Read on to find out how easy it is to grow most any variety and learn about new kinds of squash you may want to try out this year!

Where did squash come from? Squash originated in

the Americas, and it is one of the major and earliest plants domesticated in Mexico and North America, along with maize and beans. Remains of squash seeds, rind and stems were found in caves in Mexico and were dated to 8,000 BC.

Summer squash seedlings should be started inside about three to four weeks before you plan to transplant them. Peat pots with potting mix work just fine. One seed per pot should be pushed about ½ inch below the surface of the soil. It takes around eight days for seeds to germinate, and once the soil temperature outside has reached 70 degrees Fahrenheit or more, you can directly transplant them – regardless of their size.

No hardening off is needed, as the soil temperature should be very close to indoor temps at this point.

Summer squash grows best on fertile, well-drained soil



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supplied with organic matter. The ideal pH for summer squash growth is between 6.0 to 7.5, but it will grow on soils with a pH of up to 8.0.

Squash needs heat, water and sunlight to thrive. Squash loves water, and since it will start getting very warm during their peak season, it's important to watch for wilt. As the leaves become droopy during the day, it is a sign that they need watering – even if the soil seems moist.

Since these plants should be grown in an area of full sun, I make sure to water in the early morning at the base of plants, so that the leaves don't get wet. When plants are overwatered and too close together, they can develop powdery mildew. This

indicates that air is not able to circulate around the plants and their leaves.

Squash bugs and cucumber beetles can be a problem with summer squash. Pick off adults by hand. Other effective

treatments for squash bugs and cucumber beetles include row covers, crop rotation, vertical gardening, board traps and planting resistant varieties.

It is very important that you never plant summer squash in the same area



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIXABAY

Patty pan or scallop type squash are best picked when small.

you did the year before. Crop rotation is key not only for replenishing nutrients in the soil, but also for diminishing the risk of certain infestations and ailments.

Summer squash plants bear separate male and female flowers on the same plant (monoecious). Only the female flowers set fruit. Bees transfer pollen from male flowers to female flowers, making fruit set possible. Poor fruit set is often the result of inadequate pollination.

Here is a helpful list of some of the best summer squash varieties you can grow in your garden. These include straightnecks, zucchini, pattypan, round cultivars, and even some with bold stripes and other intriguing patterns.

■ Straightnecks include Cube of Butter and Superpik.

■ Zucchini types are soft skinned, tender squash and include such varieties as Black Beauty, Costata Romanesco, Trombocino, Golden and Gold bar.

■ Crookneck types have a curved neck and are exceptional for their flavor. Varieties include Yellow Crookneck, and Delta.

■ Round summer squashes include Ronde de Nice, a French heirloom, Lemon and Eight Ball.

■ Scallop types are also known as pattypan squash. These are pretty squash with scalloped edges. Varieties include White

Bush, Benning's Green Tint, and Golden Scallopini. These pattypan are best when picked small, at just 1-3 inches wide.

Summer squash grow quickly (in about 60 days) and are harvested throughout the summer while still young. Their skins are thin and tender, and they tend to be prolific producers. To harvest, simply cut fruits from the vine once they are 6-8 inches long. If you wait much longer, they will become less tender and flavorful.

If you enjoy young and tender squash, plant a few extras to make sure you have enough young fruits for a full recipe, especially in the early weeks. Unlike winter squash and pumpkins, which require a longer growing season, even if you find yourself reading this in June, it may not be too late to get sowing! The beauty of these plants is that everyone seems to enjoy them. I have never had a problem giving away the excess.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



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