

Growing winter squash and pumpkins



Chris Rusch
Master Gardner

Question: Can you give some information on growing pumpkins and winter squash?

Answer: Pumpkins and winter squash are among the most popular vine crops in the garden.

Winter squash is the generic term for squash plants that are harvested in the fall. There is sometimes a fine line between winter squash and a pumpkin. Pumpkins and winter squash are a summer growing annual of the genus *Cucurbita* and the family *Cucurbitaceae*, which also includes summer squash, zucchini, melons, gourds and cucumbers.

Pumpkins come from three different species. *Cucurbita pepo* include most jack-o-lantern and some pie pumpkins. *C. moschata* are excellent for pies or processing. *C. maxima*, including a most popular variety “Atlantic Giant” are extremely large pumpkins grown for competition and decoration.

Edible winter squash belong to three different species: *Cucurbita pepo* (acorn, delicata and spaghetti-squash types), *C. moschata* (butternut types) and *C. maxima* (Hubbard, kabocha, and buttercup types). Some varieties produce small squashes the right size for an individual serving, while others produce enormous fruits of 15 pounds or more – good for soups, pies, mashing or freezing.

Selected varieties of winter squash for our area include:

■ **Acorn.** Most acorn squash are small, tender, sweet and delicious.

■ **Delicata.** Most delicata squash are oblong, medium-sized, with tan skin and green stripes. It has light orange flesh and a mild nutty flavor.



PHOTO BY CHRIS RUSCH

Most acorn squash are small, tender, sweet and delicious.

■ **Spaghetti.** Spaghetti squash is a unique small-sized squash with a stringy flesh often used as a noodle substitute in recipes.

■ **Butternut.** Most butternut squash have smooth, beige skin that is perfectly smooth. They have dense, deep orange flesh and excellent flavor.

■ **Buttercup.** Most buttercup squash are small and convenient for a couple of people. The fruit is dark green and turban-shaped with sweet, dense orange flesh.

■ **Hubbard.** The Hubbard is the dinosaur of the squash world. It is big and some are covered with warts. While the flesh is sweet, orange, and fine-textured, it is starchier than other varieties.

■ **Kabocha.** This is a Japanese squash with dark green and paler green stripes, and a flattened top giving it a flat shape. The flesh is extra dense, silky smooth and sweet.

■ **Red Kuri.** Red

Kuri is a lovely red/orange-skinned squash, small in size. Its flesh is mild, not too sweet with nutty overtones.

Both pumpkins and winter squash require full sun. Avoid sites with shade or partial shade. Start your plants in early April in a greenhouse or cold frame for transplanting in May. Keep only the strongest plants.

Pumpkins and winter squash require fertile soil. Before planting, spade the soil about a foot deep and mix in some compost, manure, and well-balanced fertilizer. Mound up the soil in this area and plant your strongest looking pumpkin or squash in the middle.

Keep the soil moist but not wet. Too much water will slow plant growth and encourage fungal diseases. Water deeply and regularly at the base of each plant, especially during hot weather and once the fruits start to form. Time your watering so the leaves have time to

dry before dusk. This will reduce disease problems.

Remove all young moisture and nutrient-robbing weeds by hand or with a hoe and use mulch around the plants to keep weeds from germinating. The goal is to maximize the amount of sunlight received by the leaves as well as the amount of water and nutrients available to the roots.

Common insects affecting your pumpkins and winter squash include spotted and striped cucumber beetles. They can damage the plants by eating leaves as well as flowers, stems and fruit. They are also a potential vector of bacterial wilt. These can be controlled by catching them early and applying insecticidal soap.

Diseases such as powdery mildew can be avoided by keeping plants healthy, with good air circulation and using proper watering techniques. Be sure to practice good crop rotation as well.

Winter squash and

pumpkins are ready to harvest when the fruit has a hard rind that you cannot push your fingernail into. Butternut squash will turn from a greenish color to a deep tan. Acorn squash will develop an orange spot on the underside. Pick your winter squash and pumpkins before a hard freeze. A light frost that kills the vines will usually not harm the fruit.

Cut the fruit from the vine, leaving a few inches of the stem attached. Be careful not to bruise the fruit. After cutting pumpkins and squash from the vines, let the fruit field cure in place for a week or two in dry sunny weather. This method will dry and toughen the skin for longer storage.

If the weather has turned cold or rainy, you can cure the squash indoors in a warm well-ventilated place. Most winter squashes can be stored for 3-4 months.

Winter squash should be stored in a cool but not cold place, ideally around

55 degrees, with good air movement. Squashes and pumpkins used as autumn decorations are vulnerable to cold, wet weather, so they can spoil easily.

Winter squash and pumpkins have been grown in the US for hundreds of years. They are as beautiful as they are nutritious. Winter squash and pumpkins are easy to grow and store well, so consider adding them to your garden bounty.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Starting in October, the Plant Clinic will be open Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 1-4 PM. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.