

Winter Squash

by Claudia Steen

When fall comes - thoughts turn to harvesting winter squash, which are often described as 'comfort' foods. Squash is in the family Cucubita, with two main groups: summer squash and winter squash. **Summer squash** varieties include zucchini, yellow crock neck and scallop or pattypan squash. There are many varieties of **Winter Squash** include butternut, acorn, Hubbard, buttercup, and spaghetti. Unlike summer squash, it is eaten after it reaches the mature fruit stage when the rind has become thick and hardened. It stores well without refrigeration and each vine will yield from 10 to 20 squash if properly maintained. Butternut squash (*c. mochata*) is one of the most popular winter squash. Weighing between 4-7 pounds, it is a good size for small families. Also, its shape and small seed cavity means that it takes up less room in storage than a large hollow pumpkin. According to Dorothy Leggett, the squash was originally bred in the 1940s by her late husband, Charles, who named it butternut because it was "smooth as butter and sweet as a nut." Later, her husband gave some seed to researchers at Waltham Experimental Field Station in Massachusetts, resulting in the very popular variety, Waltham Butternut.



Plant Butternut squash when all danger of frost is past and the soil is well warmed by the sun, about 60 – 65°. Don't rush to plant as the seeds will only germinate in warm soil. Seedlings are extremely tender and will not tolerate the slightest frost. You can also start your seeds indoors to give them a head start. The seeds should be planted six weeks before the last spring frost date. Plant in good soil in a sunny window or greenhouse and transplant to the garden after all danger of frost is past. Remember to harden off the seedlings before transplanting. If you plant seeds directly into the hill place five or six seeds per hill about 4 inches apart and 1 inch deep. Keep the soil moist, but not soggy. In about 10 days, the seeds will sprout. When they are about 6 inches high, thin out the weakest leaving 2-3 plants per hill. It is important to pile your soil in a hill about 18 inches high. This allows the soil to heat around the seeds and roots. Your soil should be well amended and well fertilized since butternut squash plants are heavy feeders and grow well in soil that is high in organic matter. Squash are heavy feeders so be sure to fertilize on a regular basis. Regular feeding will produce the most abundant crops. When the flowers are produced often bees will provide the pollination from the male flower to the female flower.

The Butternut squash growing season is about 110-120 days to maturity. Vines can grow up to 15 feet, so they take up a great deal of space in the home garden, therefore it is best to plant them at least 6-8 feet apart or provide trellising for the vines to climb up. Assure all weeds are removed from the soil around the plant and it is best to put mulch over the hill and around the plant to retain moisture. Don't cultivate too deeply since the roots are shallow. It is also important to keep the squash off the bare soil, examples would be to put a piece of wood underneath or put a big layer of mulch such as grass clippings on the soil.

It is important to avoid pests, for example Squash Vine borers. They look like 1” white caterpillars. Squash bugs should also be removed - they are gray-brown and ¾” long. These both can be picked off the vines and then disposed. The other helpful hint is to rotate squash crops to a different area each year to avoid pests.

Harvest the squash as late as possible in the fall. The squash can stand a light frost that will help change their starch to sugar. If picked immaturely, they are often watery and have a poor flavor. Your squash will be ready for harvesting when the vines start to die back, and the skin turns hard



and it is difficult to pierce with your thumbnail. Harvest them by clipping about 2-3 inches of vine and store them in a cool, dry area. They will often keep up to 5 months.

Butternut squash is best cut in half, the seeds removed, butter can be added to the center and baked until the flesh is soft. They are a great source of complex carbohydrates and fiber as well as high in potassium, niacin, beta carotene and iron. And of course, they have a wonderful flavor, especially when home grown from your own garden. Enjoy.

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.