

## WINTER SQUASH *Cucurbita* spp.

By Master Gardener Stephanie Wrightson



It seems strange to plant something called *winter* squash in May and June. But, this is the time of year to direct seed or transplant your winter squash because it has a very long growing season. Once cured, squash can be stored for 6 to 7 months making this a veggie that will feed your family for a long period of time.

Winter squash includes a number of squash species in the *Cucurbita* family. While the many species and varieties of winter squash are quite beautiful and edible, not all are the tastiest. In addition to taste when selecting a variety, think about how you like to eat squash because some varieties, for example, are best for soup while others are best for roasting. In addition, note the days to maturity (DTM) on the variety's seed packet which typically range from 60 to 110 days. The DTM should be compatible with your microclimate and date of planting.

Some of the varieties recommended by the *California Master Gardener Handbook* include:

- Butternut (*Cucurbita maxima*): 'Waltham,' 'Early Butternut' (semibush) and 'Burpee Butterbush' (bush).
- Acorn (*Cucurbita pepo*): 'Table King' (bush, strongly determinate meaning fruit ripens about the same time), 'Table Ace' (semibush; long storing), 'Jersey Golden' (semibush) and 'Sweet Mama'

Other popular squash types include spaghetti, hubbard, kori, buttercup and kabocha. My two favorite varieties are 'Waltham' butternut (soup and roasting) and 'Delicata' (baking). I also like acorn squash for baking but have not found it to be as productive as the other two. A couple plants of each provides my family squash for months and plenty to share with neighbors. Research your variety—not all are as prolific.



Most gardeners direct seed when the soil warms to 60 degrees F. Plant 4 to 5 seeds, 1/2- to 1-inch deep (follow seed packet instructions) in a hill of soil, keeping only the two sturdiest seedlings. I prefer to start my seed indoors in early April, keeping them in a sunny corner window with western and southern exposures until it is time to transplant them early to mid-May. Keep the soil moist (not wet) until the seeds sprout.

Most squash types and varieties can occupy a lot of the planting bed. I find that 'Waltham' Butternut can grow 20 feet long if it is happy. In a community garden with limited space, you can either grow a bush variety or grow winter squash vertically so that it doesn't cover your

entire space. If growing on a trellis, choose a variety with smaller fruit; otherwise, you will have to support large fruit with a sling (old torn t-shirts work well). I belong to a community garden because my Sonoma Valley backyard is open to deer and other critters. But, I am able to grow winter squash in my backyard. I find that critters leave the prickly plants alone. Small seedlings are protected with a piece of loose bird netting secured with irrigation staples until they outgrow the netting. Note that deer in different parts of the county can have different appetites.

Squash likes regular water, but not soggy soil. If the leaves look a little wilted in the afternoon, wait until the next morning to see if the plants perk up. It is usual for large-leaved veggies to wilt a little in the hot afternoon sun. It always is best to check soil moisture before watering any crop. If you have a healthy bee population, they will take care of pollination for you. Otherwise, help things along using a cotton swab, carefully moving pollen from male to female flowers (male flowers have narrow stems; female flowers are swollen at the base).

Winter squash shares the same potential diseases as its relatives (summer squash, cucumber, pumpkin and melons). Rotate crops in the same family every three years to avoid build-up of soil-borne diseases. Gardeners in areas that receive summer fog likely will see powdery mildew on the leaves. Space plants according to directions to ensure good air circulation. Remove the plant debris caused by this disease. Avoid overhead irrigation; even better, install drip irrigation. Trellising to provide better air circulation can be helpful. Unmanaged, the mildew can affect maturation, flavor and storage. You also can select disease-resistant varieties (e.g., ‘Cornell’s Bush Delicata,’ ‘Honey Bear’ acorn squash or butternut varieties ‘JWS6823’ or ‘Metro’).



Gardeners in warmer inland areas should keep an eye out for cucumber beetles and squash bugs. You can use a row cover to exclude squash bugs but cucumber beetles emerge from the soil. If you use row covers, check under them to make sure that you haven’t trapped pests inside. Remove row covers when you begin to see flower formation so that pollination can occur. The spotted cucumber beetle common in northern California feeds on a number of crops. Since they can produce several generations per year, my strategy is to stagger seed starting—starting a second set of seeds two to three weeks later in the event the cucumber beetles emerge when the plants are small. Mature plants can survive a mild attack but the beetles can take small seedlings down to the soil line. Beetles are easy to catch and squish or drown early in the morning when they are slow. Squash bugs are sucking insects that cause, with large infestations, wilt and death of plants.

Their eggs hatch in as little as five days. Check the underside of leaves and stems daily to look for clusters of their brownish orange eggs. Squish the eggs so that they never have a chance to suck your plants’ nutrients. If plants



start to wilt, make sure squash bugs are not the cause. Some squash varieties are more resistant to squash bugs (e.g., Butternut, 'Improved Green Hubbard' and 'Royal Acorn').

Harvest the fruit when the rind has developed the variety's mature color and is hard. You should not be able to pierce the skin with your fingernail. Also, the stem will turn dark, harden and dry. Use a sharp knife to cut the stem leaving about two inches of the stem. Do not handle the fruit by the stem; squash without a stem does not keep well. Squash can remain stored on the stem in the garden as long as they are not sitting on wet, soggy ground and there is not a hard freeze. After harvest, cure squash before storing by either leaving it in a sheltered outdoor location for five to seven days or indoors in a warm, dry ventilated place for three to five days. After curing, store squash in a single layer without touching in a cool space (ideally, 50-55 degrees F).