

Squash

Squash aren't only delicious, but good for you too. Once soil temperatures remain at about 60 degrees, the seeds of both summer and winter squash can be direct seeded into the garden. Squash prefer an organically rich, well-drained soil and as much sunshine as you can give them. Build 2 inch high mounds, 3 feet apart for bush growing varieties, and 4 to 5 feet between vining varieties, and work in a half cup of organic vegetable fertilizer under each mound. Sow 3 or 4 seeds 1 inch deep in each mound. Keep the soil just barely moist for germination. Too much moisture can cause seeds to rot. When seedlings begin to grow, thin them by allowing only the strongest grower to remain in each mound.

These days a common problem that home gardeners face when growing squash is that the fruit grows a few inches, then rots on the vine. The cause is lack of pollination. We rarely faced this problem in the past when 'drive-by zucchinings' occurred on a regular basis, namely opening your front door to be greeted by a stack of 4 foot long zucchinis left anonymously. Squash produce both male and female flowers and in order to produce healthy fruit, a bee has to transfer pollen from the male flowers to the female ones. Sadly, these days there often aren't enough bees around to get do the job. One way to help remedy this problem is to integrate flowering plants known to attract the honeybees, bumblebees and native bees into the area surrounding your vegetable garden. Sweet alyssum, Aster, Zinnia, Verbena, and lavender are just a few of the plants that will help to attract bees. If that doesn't do the trick, use a small paint brush to transfer pollen from the male flowers, which lack a fruit-like swelling at the base, to the stigma or uppermost part of the female flower which has what resembles a tiny squash at the bottom. Don't overdo it, or before long, you will be the one doing 'drive-by zucchinings' to rid yourself of an overabundance of baseball bat sized zucchinis.

The other common problem is powdery mildew, a fungus that makes leaves look like they are covered with powdered sugar. This disease rarely kills the plant, but it can weaken it, and reduces yield. The easiest way to prevent this disease is to water adequately. Drought stressed plants are much more susceptible powdery mildew. There are other factors, however, such as high humidity and poor air circulation which can make plants susceptible even if you water perfectly. Fortunately, powdery mildew can be controlled with a spray made up of 2 teaspoons of baking soda, and 4 drops of dish detergent in a quart of water. Apply at the first sign of infection and as long as you catch it early, this method should take care of the problem.

For the best flavor and texture, harvest summer squash such as zucchini and crook neck varieties before they reach 8 inches long. Winter squash on the other hand, needs to ripen on the vine in order to store well and develop the sweet flavor that makes them so delicious. It's usually time to harvest when the vines begin to dry up and the fruit turns its ripe color. It should also take quite a bit of pressure to puncture the rind with your thumbnail. Use hand pruners to cut the fruit from the vine and leave at least 2 inches of stem on the fruit. Leaving a shorter stem will cause the fruit to rot. Cure winter squash by keeping them in 70-80 degree temperatures for 15 days before storing them in a cool dry place such as a basement or garage, with temperatures around 50 to 55 degrees. The exceptions are Delicata and Acorn squash which don't need curing. Serve winter squash roasted or steamed, and don't forget the melted butter and maple syrup! Your kids won't even suspect that it is good for them.