

Growing Winter Squash



Selecting and Preparing a Site

Select a location that receives full sun and has plenty of space for sprawling vines. Most winter squash need 50 to 100 square feet to spread. Soil should be well fed and moist, but not soggy. Add compost to the soil prior to planting.



Planting

The winter squash growing season is long, generally requiring from 75 to 100 frost-free days. Seeds can be started indoors, but special care should be taken to avoid damaging the roots when transplanting. Plant seeds in peat pots or other biodegradable pots that can be planted directly in the ground without removing the plants. Squash are very sensitive to the cold. Sow seeds or plant transplants outside when the soil temperature is at least

65°F. This can range from mid-May to early June. If direct-sowing, plant two to three seeds per hole, 1 inch deep.



Caring for the Site

When seedlings are three inches tall, thin to two plants per 12 inches by snipping off unwanted plants without disturbing the roots of the remaining ones. As plants grow, you can further thin to one plant per 24 or 48 inches.

Seeds should germinate in about a week. Mulch the garden after the plants germinate. Water the soil frequently and consistently and try to keep the leaves and fruit dry. Apply fertilizer every three weeks during the growing season.

When weeding around the plants, do not over-cultivate so as not to damage the squash's shallow roots.

Use row covers when plants are young to prevent insect problems and protect from cold for the first few weeks of spring. Remove the covers before flowering occurs to allow for pollination by insects.

Do not be concerned if the first flowers do not form fruits. Squash plants have separate male and female flowers. Males appear first. Female flowers follow with an immature fruit at the bottom. To fruit, pollen from the male flowers must be transferred to the female flowers by bees or by the gardener using a cotton swab or paint brush.



Harvesting

Winter squash are usually ready to be harvested in early to mid-autumn. Harvest winter squash when the skin is thick and dull. If the skin can be pierced with your fingernail, the squash is not mature and not ready to be harvested. Harvest on a dry day after the vines have died back. Cut squashes from the vine, leaving an inch or two of stem on the squashes, using a sharp knife or pruners. Avoid tearing the squash off the vine as this could cause the stem or the vines to break. Do not carry squash by their stem because, if the stem breaks off, this exposes the skin to possible infection.

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