

## GROWING GUIDE FOR SUMMER SQUASH

<b>Binomial Name:</b>	Cucurbita
<b>Varieties:</b>	Nero Milan, Golden Butter, Tromboncino
<b>Start:</b>	Seed or seedling
<b>Germination:</b>	5 - 10 days, 15°C to 40°C
<b>Seed Life (viability):</b>	6 years
<b>Soil:</b>	Well drained, high fertility
<b>Sunlight:</b>	Full sun
<b>Sow Seeds:</b>	10cm apart in rows 120 - 150cm apart
<b>Transplant/Thin to:</b>	30 - 50cm apart
<b>Ave. Days to Harvest:</b>	50 - 60
<b>Good Companions:</b>	Beans, lettuce, marjoram, nasturtium, peas, petunia, radish, sunflower, corn, yarrow
<b>Bad Companions:</b>	Potato, sage

Most varieties of summer squash grow on compact, bushy vines in contrast to the sprawling vines of most winter squash and pumpkins. Summer squashes also differ from the winter squashes, not by the season that they are grown in (they are both grown during the warm summer season by the way) but rather by the stage that they are harvested and by the type of skin that they have.

Winter squashes are left on the plant to mature and to develop their thick, hard skins (like pumpkins and butternuts). The Summer squashes on the other hand, are harvested when they are still immature and when their skin is still soft and tender (patty pans and courgettes / zucchini are summer squashes).

### Sowing & Planting:

Summer Squashes prefer well-drained, fertile, loose soil, high in organic matter with pH between 5.8 and 6.8. Plentiful and consistent moisture is needed from the time plants emerge until fruits begin to fill out. Summer Squashes like warm soil and are very sensitive to frost so don't be in a rush to plant too early in spring. Wait until all danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed to about 20 C, or about 2 weeks after the last frost date.

Direct seed 2-2.5cm deep into hills or rows. Sow 4 to 5 seeds per hill and space hills 90cm to 1.2m apart. When the plants are 5 to 7cm tall, thin to 2 to 3 plants per hill by snipping off unwanted plants without disturbing the roots of the remaining ones. In rows, sow seeds 10cm apart in rows 120cm to 150cm apart and thin to one plant every 30 to 50cm.

For early crops, start inside in 10cm pots, 3 to 4 weeks before transplanting outside. Sow 3 or 4 seeds per pot and thin to one or two plants by snipping off the weaker plants to avoid damaging the roots of those that remain. Harden off seedlings for 3-5 days before transplanting. For an extra early first harvest, use black plastic mulch to warm the soil before direct seeding or transplanting.

## **Growing:**

Use row covers to protect plants early in the season and to prevent any insect problems. Remove the covers before flowering, to allow pollination by insects, or as soon as hot weather arrives.

Tip: Squash plants have both male and female flowers. The male flowers often blossom first, sometimes as much as two to three weeks before any female flowers start to appear. You will recognise the female flowers once they finally blossom, as they form on the ends of the immature fruits and, once pollinated, then fall off as the fruit develops. The first fruits can sometimes be wrinkled, turn black or rot due to poor pollination.

Mulching the plants will help retain moisture in the soil and suppress weeds. Mounding soil around the base of the plants can discourage squash borers from laying eggs. Scan for pests every time you go out into the garden. The cucumber beetle and the squash bug are the two most common ones to look for. The cucumber beetle usually appears late in the growing season and may damage the mature fruit. Squash bugs begin to infest the vines as soon as the blossoms appear. They are usually in large groups and can damage the plant and the mature fruit. Check with your local garden centre or nursery for the proper course of treatment for these pests because the sooner you get rid of them, the healthier your squash plants will be. Mildew can also be a problem on squash plants. A copper soap spray or a homemade solution of 1 part milk to 10 parts water will help to keep mildew at bay.

At the end of the season, remove all of the vines to reduce the chances of any mildew spreading.

## **Harvesting:**

Courgettes, summer crookneck and patty pan are the most common varieties of squash grown in the summer garden. These members of the squash family are prolific producers. They normally begin to produce about 50 days after germination and it is important to know when to harvest to ensure that you have a steady supply, throughout the season.

Summer squash varieties are usually harvested when the fruits are still immature. Whilst winter varieties mature on the vine and develop a tough skin to facilitate better winter storage, summer squash that are allowed to grow until large and gourd-like are really not good to eat. Check your squashes as soon as you notice the plant blooming.

Summer Squashes grow very fast and are sometimes ready to pick only a few days after the flowers start to bloom. Check your garden every day after that, because once the plant starts to producing, it continues steadily throughout the growing season. The more you pick, the more it will produce. For this reason, you may want to consider having only a few plants of each variety, unless you intend to feed the whole neighbourhood. If you miss a day or two of harvesting, and end up with larger squash, grate them and make bread with it or scoop it out and fill it with your favourite stuffing to bake.

Remove the squashes by cutting them from the vine with a sharp knife. They have very thin skins and bruise easily, so handle them gently. Wearing gloves is advisable, as the stalks may scratch or irritate your hands.

Store your Summer Squashes in the refrigerator, unwashed. Moisture encourages decay of fresh vegetables, so place them in a plastic bag in the vegetable crisper. If you have a large amount, place them in a plastic bag and handle them as little as possible to prevent bruising the delicate skin. They'll stay fresh for 3 to 5 days, under the proper storage conditions.

Tip: Consider harvesting the squash flowers, which are completely edible and are used in a variety of recipes, as well as eaten raw in salads. Although both male and female flowers are

edible, it makes sense to only pick the males and leave the females to produce the fruit (leaving enough male flowers to ensure pollination of course). Gather them when the petals are open, leaving about an inch of stem intact. Use them within a day because they deteriorate rapidly once picked. They may last a few days longer if you rinse them and store them in ice water in the refrigerator.

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