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Get Squashed Next Year

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GARDEN NOTES

GET SQUASHED NEXT YEAR

By Dennis Hinkamp

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It's a little late to plant squash but a good time to eat them and plan your gardening strategy for next year.

Unlike zucchini, winter squash are allowed to grow to about the size of a small pickup truck, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Any zucchini bigger than a banana is only good for zucchini bread or compost.

Winter squash, summer squash and pumpkins are related and sometimes hard to tell apart, Goodspeed explains. Pumpkins are generally considered to be drier, coarser and stronger flavored than winter squash. Pumpkin must be blended with lots of sugar and spices and placed in a flaky pie crust to bake. Summer squash are not considered sweet either and are eaten when small and immature. Winter squash, however, are naturally sweet, moist and mild flavored. They can be baked and eaten right out of the oven.

Winter squash are actually easy to grow and do well in Utah, he says. In fact, they often do too well, as they attempt to take over gardens or neighborhoods when left unchecked. As delicious as winter squash are to eat, their size is their one main downfall. Most are vining type plants, with a few bush type. The vining varieties require almost 50 square feet to be happy. This means you need to plant them in rows about 5 feet apart and leave at least 5 feet between the plants.

The bush types do not require quite as much room, Goodspeed says. They still need about 5 feet between the rows but can be spaced as close as 3 feet between plants. Not all varieties of winter squash are available as bushing types.

There are many different types of winter squash, he says. Acorn squash are a small, bush type, while Hubbards are a large, funny-looking, blue-gray, vining squash. Buttercup are a round, green, vining type, and butternut are a medium-sized, tan-colored squash. Spaghetti squash are long and light-colored. There are many other types of squash grown on a lesser scale.

Winter squash can be started from seed or bought as transplants from your favorite nursery, he says. Plant them in the garden as soon as the danger of frost has passed in the spring (usually around the middle of May). They are a tender crop that can be damaged or killed by a hard frost.

Fertilize winter squash with an all-purpose fertilizer right at planting time, he adds. Then, if needed, side dress with a nitrogen fertilizer as the plant begins to flower and fruit later in the growing season. Like most vegetables, squash need deep, infrequent watering. Excess moisture can cause weakened plants, root rot and other problems as the plants mature.

"One of the more frustrating problems is called Sudden Wilt of Cucurbita," Goodspeed adds. "This disease strikes the plant about the time the fruit starts to set and grow, causing it to suddenly wilt and die over a couple of days. There has been no positive identification of the pathogen, but it is believed that excess water aggravates the problem. There are not many other problems when growing winter squash. Occasionally squash bugs invade a plant, but they can easily be removed by hand. Powdery mildew often intrudes on the plants in late summer, but it can be controlled by organic methods or careful use of a registered fungicide."

Large winter squash are generally harvested in the late summer, he says. Don't be tempted to harvest them too early. They are sweeter and more flavorful if allowed to ripen completely on the vine. It is easy to determine if the squash is ready to harvest. When ripe, the stem that attaches the fruit to the plant is dry and hard.

To harvest the fruit, cut it away from the plant, leaving the dried stem on the fruit, he explains. It is then ready to be eaten or stored for later use. Winter squash that are free of diseases, insects and mechanical damage store better and longer than those that have been injured. When storing winter squash, first cure them for two weeks by placing them in a room with a temperature of 75 F degrees. Then, store them in a cool location where they should stay good for several months.

If you did not have the space in your garden this year to grow a winter squash, you can still enjoy their wonderful flavor, Goodspeed says. Just pick one up from a local farmer's market or fruit stand. Then, next year, consider dedicating a roomy space in your garden to a couple of winter squash.

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.

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