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Squash: Sometimes Bigger Is Better

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GARDEN NOTES

SQUASH: SOMETIMES BIGGER IS BETTER

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Other than setting records and annoying the neighbors there are no good reasons to let most vegetables reach their maximum size.

Most vegetables should be harvested when young and tender and certainly before you need a wheelbarrow to carry them to the neighbor's car, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. About the only exception to this rule is winter squash.

When are winter squash ripe?

"If the squash are picked too early they will not store well nor be as sweet," he says. "Normally, I wait until the stem of the fruit is dry and hard and the same is true for the squash itself, before harvesting. Press a finger nail into the skin of the squash. It should be hard to penetrate and no moisture will form in the indentation."

Once picked, most winter squash can be stored for several months, Goodspeed says. The ideal storage environment is a cool (50-55 F), dark room. The stem should be completely dry and a good inch long for proper storage. Protect the squash from freezing temperatures and do not store any that is damaged or has soft spots.

Most varieties of winter squash are sweet and can be grown here in Northern Utah, he says. Most require a long season and must be set out into the garden as soon as the last frost has passed in the spring.

"The problem is, many varieties of winter squash are huge, power hungry vines that overtake the rest of the garden," Goodspeed says. "Their appetite for land can be reduced by growing them up tomato cages or on fences. If grown as a vine, larger fruit may need a plant 'hammock' or some support to keep from falling off the vine before reaching maturity.

"For instance, butternut is sweet, easy to grow and can be cooked in a variety of ways, but it requires a lot of space," he explains. "If this is a problem, try the newer 'Butterbush' variety that requires no more room than a large tomato plant."

The largest winter squash is probably the "Banana," he says. The world record for this variety is around 150 pounds. The problem with banana squash is they are so large that once they are cut they become a staple of every meal for the next month.

Vegetable spaghetti squash is probably the most popular, Goodspeed says. It is a smaller plant that grows best up a trellis. Since the fruit is smaller, it will not need to be supported. Its unique meat looks similar to cooked spaghetti noodles.

Other winter squash include acorn, blue hubbard, buttercup and Turk's turban, he adds. Again, if space is a problem, look for 'bush' varieties.

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