



Winter Squash

Winter squash is a warm season vegetable that grows and produces well in Arizona. It differs from summer squash in that it is harvested and eaten in the mature fruit stage, when the seeds within have matured fully and the skin has hardened into a tough rind. When ripened to this stage, fruits of most varieties can be stored for use throughout the winter. Pumpkins are also closely related to winter squash.

The ideal time to plant winter squash is mid-May to July 1 at the 3000 to 6000 ft elevations, and in July at the lower elevations of Yavapai County. Seeds do not germinate well in cold soil and seedlings are damaged by frost, so, the later planting dates are probably best. Most gardeners plant squash on small mounds. Prepare soil for squash mounds by digging a 2 foot wide/1 foot deep hole and placing a couple of shovels of aged manure or compost. Plant 5 seeds per mound and thin to 2 or 3 plants per mounds when they are well established. Vining squash plants require considerable growing space and are best suited for large gardens. The bush and semi-vining types can be grown in smaller gardens. Vines can also be trellised.

After germination, you should keep your squash patch weeded and regularly irrigated. As soon as the plants occupy the allotted space, weeds will be shaded out. At this point, your work is done and you can let the bees take over. Each plant has male and female flowers. Bees visit both sexes of flowers and fertilize the female flowers after which, the female flowers produce squash fruits.

Winter squash can be harvested whenever the fruits have turned a deep, solid color and the rind is hard. Harvest the main part of the crop in September or October, before heavy frosts hit your area. Cut squash from the vines carefully, leaving two inches of stem attached if possible. Avoid cuts and bruises when handling. Fruits that are not fully mature, have been injured, have had their stems knocked off, or have been subjected to heavy frost do not keep as well and should be used as soon as possible.

After harvest, winter squash should be stored in a dry location where the temperature is between 50 and 55°F. For prolonged storage, do not pile squash more than two fruits deep. It is best to place the squash in a single layer so that they do not touch each other.

Squash bugs attack vines as the fruit begins to set and they increase in numbers through the late summer, when they can be quite damaging to maturing fruit. They hatch and migrate in groups. Using the proper insecticide when the numbers of this pest are still small minimizes damage. Insecticides should only be used when damage is serious. Hand picking and shop vacs have also been used. Watch for characteristic egg masses and crush them with gloved hands. If you decide to apply an insecticide, use a product labeled for the specific pest and vegetable crop, follow label directions, and spray it in the early evening to minimize impacts on bees.



Squash bugs in multiple life stages (Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org).

Winter squash is a source of complex carbohydrate (natural sugar and starch) and fiber. Winter squash is also a source of potassium, niacin, and iron. Yellow varieties are also high in beta-carotene. Steamed squash stores well in the freezer.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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