

Home/Garden

In praise of squash

Squash has long deserved a year dedicated to its appreciation; the National Garden Bureau has named 1988 The Year of the Squash.

Squash is one of the oldest crops grown in the New World. The remains of several species of squash were found in the Ocampo caves in Tamaulipas, Mexico along with other gourds and jack beans. These remains date back to as early as 7000 B.C.

The Cochise Indians were among the first to cultivate squash in our own country. As early as 4000 B.C. squash was grown in New Mexico, as was corn.

Later beans were introduced and this triadic planting of corn, beans and squash became a basic part of the area's prosperity. When a 23-year drought started in 1276 the southwestern Indians migrated to the south and southwest, bringing their agricultural technology with them. The earliest colonists survived because they saw this successful planting pattern and copied it.

Growing corn, beans and squash in the same plot was very practical. The corn stalk provided a pole for the beans, and the squash was grown as a living ground cover. The squash not only provided food, but also helped control weeds, provided kindling for cooking and produced a good organic mulch.

A fascinating new book, *Blue Corn and Square Tomatoes: Unusual Facts About Common Garden Vegetables* by Rebecca Rupp (Garden Way Publishing, \$9.95 paper) tells us that it was the seedsman James J.H. Gregory of Marblehead who formally introduced American gardeners to the Hubbard squash.

Apparently in the 1830s a single Hubbard squash found its way to Marblehead where it was cultivated by a lady who died, then taken up and grown by Captain Knott Martin. A Mrs. Elizabeth Hubbard admired this squash for its many good qualities and passed it on to Gregory. Since she was such a worthy person herself, Gregory named the squash after her. His seed business boomed after he started selling this variety.

The Hubbard squash, which keeps so well all through the long New England winter, is still a staple in many people's gardens, but smaller winter squashes have become even more popular.

Many winter squash varieties have an exuberant vining habit. You must take this into consideration when you decide where to plant it in the garden. If you have the room, you can allow them to sprawl or you can train them on a trellis.

A four-foot-high trellis is sufficient to support the smaller-fruited winter squash, but be sure to locate it where it will not shade your other crops.

Planting

Because gardens have been growing smaller, more and more bush varieties of squash have been developed. Summer squash is also pro-

Pat
Leuchtman

Between
The Rows



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duced on a bushy plant.

Choose a sunny spot for your squash. Make sure the soil is well drained and has a pH level between 5.5 - 6.8. Squash is a heavy feeder. Dig plenty of compost and well-rotted manure into the planting bed. I usually dig a hole about eight inches deep and 16 inches in diameter. I nearly fill the hole with compost and manure, then add an inch or two of soil. Plant six or seven seeds and water well. Later I'll thin this hill to the strongest three seedlings.

Summer squash is especially susceptible to drought so keep the plants well watered. Winter squash is fairly drought resistant once the plants are established. If you do have to water squash plants, water deeply and preferably with a drip system. Wet leaves may encourage foliar diseases like mildew.

Once the plant starts producing squash, keep picking and the plant will keep producing. Check your summer squash plants every day or two. It only takes four or five days for a squash to be ready for harvest.

Winter squash is ready for harvest when the skin is hard and resists thumbnail pressure. Cut stems one or two inches from the end of the fruit. Twisting or pulling squash from the vine may break open the fruit and it will decay much more quickly.

Cure the squash by putting in a warm (75-80 degree) room or porch for a week or two. Then store in a well-ventilated room where the temperatures don't fluctuate too much and don't go below 50 degrees.

Winter squash can be stored for at least three or four months which makes it a bargain. It's a dependable crop, nutritious and easy to store.

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