



# GET GROWING: Planting squash in the garden

*Brian Sebade*

Successfully growing squash in Wyoming requires selecting good varieties, hard work, persistence – and a little bit of luck. Match the type of squash with the gardening environment to increase the odds of success.

## Variety Selection

Squash are in the *Cucurbita* genus, which includes other vegetables such as cucumbers. Three species, *Cucurbita pepo*, *Cucurbita moschata*, and *Cucurbita maxima*, were domesticated in different regions of the Americas and provide us with most of the squash plants used today.

Selecting squash varieties for a garden or farm can be daunting. With such a long history of cultivation, trade, and importance as a food, there is a plethora of varieties from which to choose. Varieties we enjoy on our dinner table today were

developed in not only the Americas, but also in Europe and Asia.

Squash varieties can be selected based on plant growth pattern, shape, color, taste, storage options, and days to maturity.

## Growth pattern

Squash plants grow in a spreading vine pattern or in a bush growth pattern. Vining plants are great for fences or other vertical structures or can be grown directly on the ground. Squash with bush growth patterns have more compact growth and do not vine out. They tend to use less space than vining types when not trellised. No matter the growth pattern, plan on squash using a lot of area for production compared to many other vegetable plants.

## Color and shape

Squash fruits might be smooth, have ridges, warts, or a combination of all three. Common fruit shapes are

round, flat, scalloped, acorn, straight-neck, crookneck, oblong, or a mix.

Squash might be dull or vibrant in color with all shades of the color spectrum in solid, stripped, or bicolored patterns. With so many combinations of color and shape, squash can provide gardeners with something new and exciting each year.

## Storage options

There are so many varieties of squash that gardeners have placed these brightly colored vegetables in two categories to help with organization: summer and winter. **Summer squash** are harvested when the skin is still soft and fruits have not fully matured, whereas **winter squash** are harvested when the skin is hard and fruits have fully matured. Summer squash includes species such as zucchini, scallops, and crookneck squash. Winter squash includes pumpkins, gourds, butternut, spaghetti, and many other hard-skinned



*Squash vary widely in shapes and colors. This one resembles a cucumber.*

squashes. In general, winter squash can be stored for longer periods of time than summer squash before they spoil.

### **Days to maturity and temperatures**

Squash like it hot! Eighty- and 90-degree temperatures are perfect. Average summer temperatures in Wyoming vary from location to location, as do the number of days in the growing season. In short growing season areas (such as high elevations), consider growing summer squash, which generally have shorter days to maturity than winter squash. A combination of winter and summer squash is great for areas that can accommodate summer and winter squash varieties throughout the growing season.

### **Squash planting and care**

Squash seeds can be purchased, but saving seeds is also an option. Fruits should be allowed to mature before harvesting, then clean the seeds free of plant flesh and juices for proper storage. Seeds need to be dried for several weeks in a dry, cool,

and dark location and then stored in a similar location before use the following year. Keep in mind squash easily cross-pollinate, so you might end up with a very “strange” squash in the garden the following year.

Squash can be directly seeded into a container or garden bed, usually around an inch deep once soils have warmed and freezing temperatures are past. Plants can also be started inside and then transplanted outside to get a start on the growing season. If transplanting seeds, make sure immature or baby plants have plenty of light so they do not become “leggy.” Leggy plants get this name because of elongated stems that are formed when plants try to reach for light. Leggy plants are often less structurally sound and can have issues once transplanted. Transplants can be started in a multitude of fashions. Please refer to the article from *Barnyards & Backyards* for starting seeds indoors at [bit.ly/starterseed](http://bit.ly/starterseed).

Planting in hills or on level ground works for growing squash. Plant five to six seeds near each other and then thin seeds to one or two plants. Hills

should be spaced anywhere from 3 to 6 feet apart depending on the variety.

Squash should be grown in full sun, soils high in nutrients, with access to ample and consistent water. Rotate planting to a different area of the garden each year to avoid disease issues.

### **Disease and pest issues**

Powdery mildew is a common problem squash face throughout Wyoming. Plants grown in greenhouses or high tunnels tend to be more susceptible because of the increased humidity. Sprinklers can also increase the risk due to more water on the leaves of plants.

Along with climate controls, consider planting varieties resistant to powdery mildew to reduce problems. Applications of products that contain copper can help decrease the spread of mildew when plants are young. Read labels for all products before applying to crops.

While fairly uncommon, insects do attack squash. Aphids, squash beetles, spider mites, and whiteflies are some of the insects that can be problems. If you think you might have insect issues, contact your local UW Extension office for insect identification and control options.

### **Edible portions**

The flesh, seeds, and blossoms can be eaten on squash plants. Squash have male and female flowers on plants. Eating the female flowers will decrease production. The male flowers have a stem that is longer and thinner than that of the female flowers. Seeds can also be eaten. Roasting or baking seeds is the most common practice.

The skin and flesh of summer squash can be eaten, while most people just consume the flesh of winter squash. The flesh of different

varieties will have different colors, textures, and tastes. There are some varieties of decorative squash and gourds that are not edible.

**Some common edible squash varieties to try in the home garden**

(Numbers in parenthesis are days to maturity)

**Summer squash**

Yellow crookneck (58), Black Beauty Zucchini (48), Cosmos (60), yellow, green, or white scallop (50-60), Saffron (50), Lemon (60), Cocozelle (50),

**Winter squash**

Buttercup (95), Red Kuri (92), Waltham Butternut (105), Blue Hubbard (110), Connecticut field pumpkin (100), Early Acorn (75), Table Queen (80), Spaghetti (100), Boston Marrow (105), Delicata (105).

Make a splash of new colors and textures in your garden with squash. There are endless varieties to experiment with, so don't feel frustrated if you do not succeed right away. Contact your local University of Wyoming Extension office or Master Gardener chapter. If you have more questions related to growing squash in Wyoming.



*Mini squash at flower base identifies this as a female flower rather than male.*

You've previously read about **Brian Sebade's** appetite for selected weeds, and he's also a wise green bean and carrot grower. Add squash to his vegetable toolbox. Sebade is the University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Albany County and serving southeast Wyoming. He can be reached at (307) 721-2571 or bsebade@uwyo.edu.

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