

150

VARIETIES OF  
SQUASH GROWN IN THE  
UNITED STATES



# Squash It!

It's prime time for one of the most potent superfoods on earth.

By *Matthew Kadey, R.D.* / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN KANTOR

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Native Americans prized winter squash so much, legend has it they buried them beside their dead to make sure they had enough fuel in the afterlife. And who can blame them? The high levels of potassium and iron, as well as fiber and vitamins A and C, in this winter veggie may help lower blood pressure and prevent cancer and heart disease. All this for just 75 calories a cup!

But there's more: Squash's impressive flexibility, mildly sweet flavors, and brilliant hues make it a vibrant addition to fall and winter menus when other fresh options fade. "It has a place in every part of the meal—soup, salad, entrée, side dish, even dessert," says Jackie Newgent, R.D., author of *Big Green Cookbook* and instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education. And few foods pack more of a powerful nutritional punch at so low a cost.

The only hitch? Most of us don't know what the hell we're supposed to do with these oddly shaped veggies. So here's an introduction to the wide world of squash and how you can simply and easily transform them from produce-aisle curiosities into the stars of your winter table.

### *The Sweet and Lowdown on Serving Winter Squash*

No matter what types you choose to feast on, the buying, storing, and prepping are basically the same.

**PICK IT** "You want squash that's heavy for its size with a taut skin, matte finish, and no soft spots or cracks," says Ellie Krieger, R.D., author of *So Easy* and host of the Food Network's show *Healthy Appetite*. Also, do the fingernail test: If you can press it into the rind fairly easily, that means the squash was picked before it was fully ripe and you should pass on it.

**STORE IT** Stash it in a dry, relatively cool place with good air circulation (like a cellar or well-ventilated pantry) and winter squash will keep for several weeks, not just a few days like many other veggies. "Wrapped tightly in plastic, cut squash is good in the fridge for up to a week," says Newgent, so you can prep a couple of squashes on a Sunday and then use them all week long.

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THE NUMBER OF MILLIGRAMS OF MUSCLE-CRAMP BATTLING POTASSIUM IN JUST ONE CUP OF BUTTERNUT SQUASH

**SLICE IT** Start with a sharp, hefty chef's knife or cleaver and get ready to put some muscle into it. Hack off the stem, firmly cut into the rind using the full length of the blade, and press down to slice in half. "If the rind is too tough to cut, cook the squash on high in the microwave for two minutes to soften it slightly," suggests Newgent. Remove the seeds with a spoon or ice cream scoop.

**PEEL IT** Krieger recommends cutting one inch from the top and the bottom before peeling, to keep the squash from rolling around. Place it upright, then, using a sharp knife, follow the shape of the squash to remove the peel. For some types of squash (like spaghetti) or for certain recipes, you can cook in the rind and then scoop out the flesh when it's done.

**BAKE IT** Brush the flesh with vegetable oil, place it on a baking sheet, and bake at 350°F for about 40 minutes or until the flesh is tender. To speed things up, Newgent chops squash into one-inch cubes, which slashes the bake time in half.

**MICROWAVE IT** You can also nuke squash (the taste will be almost the same, although the rind won't get as soft and you won't get the caramelized browning that you do when you bake it): Arrange pieces of squash in a microwave-safe dish and cover loosely with unbleached parchment paper. Cook on high for eight to 10 minutes for halves, or six to eight minutes for cubes. Let stand for a few minutes before serving. ■



## SAVE THE SEEDS!

Trash they're not—these babies are loaded with health protectors.

Squash seeds deliver a bonanza of nutrients, including protein, zinc, magnesium, iron, and phosphorus. For a fab snack, wash off the pulp, dry the seeds on a paper towel, then toss with a bit of olive oil and seasonings such as salt, pepper, cayenne, garlic powder, cinnamon—whatever makes you happy. Spread seeds on parchment paper or aluminum foil on a baking sheet and bake at 350°F for 15 to 20 minutes, until they start to brown.

## WINTER PESTO

Another way to use these mineral powerhouses: Try this delicious pesto recipe created by Jackie Newgent, R.D., author of *Big Green Cookbook*.

- 2 c fresh basil
- 3 cloves garlic
- ¼ c roasted squash seeds
- ½ c extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅓ c Parmesan cheese, grated

Put basil, garlic, and seeds in a food processor and pulse several times. While the motor is running, add olive oil, cheese, and salt to taste. Process until just smooth and combined.

**Squash has a place in every part of the meal—soup, salad, entrée, side dish, even dessert.**

# CAN YOU NAME THAT SQUASH?

## A guide to identifying winter's confusing bounty



**ACORN**  
Dark green on the outside, this (duh!) acorn-shaped supermarket regular has a yellow-orange flesh that tastes like black pepper and hazelnuts.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** Lightly coat the squash surface with butter, sugar, sea salt, and pure maple syrup, then bake.



**SPAGHETTI**  
A watermelon-shaped squash with a golden-yellow rind, it gets its name from the spaghetti-like strands the flesh turns into once cooked and forked. If you like a nuttier zest to your veggies, this squash is for you.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** For a tasty side dish, Food Network's Ellie Krieger, R.D., scrapes out the cooked strands with a fork and coats the "noodles" with pesto (check out the great pesto recipe using squash seeds, to the left).



**BUTTERNUT**  
This yellowish pear- or hourglass-shaped squash has a silky deep-orange flesh and a flavor reminiscent of a lighter-tasting sweet potato.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** For an easy soup, Krieger suggests putting cooked butternut squash, vegetable broth, and spices in a blender, then whirling away.



**SWEET DUMPLING**  
A small, pumpkin-shaped squash that has bright green streaks; its taste ranges from nutty to mildly sweet.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** Stuff baked halves with a pilaf mixture of quinoa, sautéed onions, fresh cilantro, roasted pecans, and dried cranberries for an easy entrée.



**BUTTERCUP**  
This green-skinned, almost square-shaped squash with creamy orange flesh will rock your taste buds with its supersweet finish.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** In a blender, mix chunks of baked buttercup along with tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, cumin, cayenne, salt, and pepper for a riff on traditional hummus.



**DELICATA**  
The oblong squash has pale yellow skin with green markings. The creamy pulp has a pleasing taste that's a mix of corn and sweet potato.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** Smash roasted delicata with boiled potatoes, milk, olive oil, salt, and fresh chives.



**HUBBARD**  
This blue-gray, green, or orange-red squash has wart-covered skin (it makes the squash durable) and a grainy, mildly sweet flesh.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** Cut into cubes and push onto skewers. Brush with oil or butter, season with nutmeg, and grill until soft. Before serving, drizzle with honey or maple syrup.



**KABOCHA**  
From Japan, this squat squash is forest green. The orange flesh is dry yet übersweet when roasted.

**ONE WAY TO ENJOY IT:** Combine baked kabocha with lentils, tomatoes, red peppers, parsley, and feta. Top with a drizzle of sesame oil.