



CARING FOR YOUR VEGETABLE PLANTS: SQUASH

Squashes are warm season plants and do not do well until soil and air temperatures are above 60 degrees. Squash plants have separate male and female flowers on the same plant. The male flowers do not produce fruit but they do supply the pollen that fertilizes female flowers. Pollen must be transferred to the female flowers by bees for fruit to develop. Summer squash grows on non-vining bushes. Many varieties have different fruit shapes and colors. The three main types include the yellow straight neck or crooked neck; the white, saucer shaped, scallop or patty pan; and the oblong, green, grey or gold zucchini.

Transplanting

Soil containing plenty of well-rotted compost or manure is ideal, although good crops may be grown in average soils that have been fertilized adequately. Spread and mix organic amendments and a granular phosphorus fertilizer over the area. Make the hole deep enough to bury the stem as far as the first leaf. Transplants can be planted through black plastic. Set plants out approximately 2 feet apart (up to 4 feet for winter squash). Place the plant deep into the hole. Press the soil firmly around the plant and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets. Water thoroughly. An application of 1 to 2 cups of diluted fertilizer solution may help each plant as a starter fertilizer. If transplanting in the summer, shade the plants in the middle of the day for the first week or use a floating row cover.

Watering

Squash like well-drained soil with pH 5.8-7.0. They also have a large root system, up to 4 feet deep but the majority of the roots are in the top 12-18 inches of soil, so it is important to try to irrigate to avoid water stress (drying out) and excessive wetness. During harvest too little moisture results in misshapen fruit while too much water will aggravate root and stem diseases.



Fertilizing

Squash are heavy feeders, but adding too much nitrogen encourages the plants to produce green leafy growth rather than flowers and fruits. Use a fertilizer with low nitrogen and high potassium and phosphorous for good fruit development. After blossoms appear and plants begin to set fruit, apply a complete balanced fertilizer.

Harvesting

Under good growing conditions, fruits are ready for first harvest 50 to 65 days after seeds are planted. Zucchini types should be harvested when immature, about 6 to 8 inches long and 1½ to 2 inches in diameter; patty-pan types, when 3 to 4 inches in diameter; yellow crookneck, when 4 to 7 inches long. If the squash rind is too hard to be marked by a thumbnail, it is too old. Remove old fruit to allow new fruit to develop. Check plants daily once they begin to bear. They are usually ready to pick 4 to 8 days after flowering. Harvest winter squash when stems are greyish and starting to shrivel.

Pest Management

Thorough information on pest management can be read at:

<http://www.ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/VEGES/squash.html>.