

Strengthening Families

Cumberland County Center

May and June 2016

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Summer Squash

Summer squash is a tender, warm-season vegetable that can be grown throughout the United States anytime during the warm, frost-free season. Summer squash differs from fall and winter squash in that it is selected to be harvested before the rind hardens and the fruit matures. It grows on bush type plants that do not spread like the plants of fall and winter squash and pumpkin. A few healthy and well-maintained plants produce abundant yields.

Most people harvest summer squash too late. Like winter squash, summer squash is an edible gourd. Unlike winter squash, it is harvested at an immature state. Ideally, summer squash should be harvested at 6 to 8 inches in length. Pattypan and scallopini are ready when they measure about 3 to 4 inches in diameter or less. Tiny baby squash are delicious too.

In this newsletter summer squash varieties will be limited to zucchini, yellow squash (crooked and straight), pattypan and scallopini. Because summer squash is immature, the skin is very thin and susceptible to damage. Handle with care. Cut the squash from the vine using a sharp knife or pruning shears.

The average family only needs to plant one or two of each variety. Excessive planting usually leads to hoards of huge inedible fruit.

To store squash, harvest small squash and place, unwashed in plastic bags, in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. Wash the squash just before preparing. As with most vegetables, water droplets promote decay during storage. The storage life of summer squash is brief, so use within two to three days.

Because summer squash is immature, they are considerably lower in nutritional value than their winter counterparts. Generally there is little variation in nutritional value between varieties. The peel is where many of the nutrients hide, so never peel summer squash.

Nutrition Facts (1 cup sliced, raw zucchini)

Calories: 16
Protein: 1.31 grams
Carbohydrates: 3.27 grams
Dietary Fiber: 1.36 grams
Calcium: 16.95
Potassium: 280.24
Vitamin A: 384 IU
Folate: 24.93 mcg



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Squash Blossoms

Squash blossoms are edible flowers, raw or cooked. Both summer and winter squash blossoms can be battered and fried in a little oil for a wonderful taste sensation. Harvest only the male blossoms unless the goal is to reduce production. Male blossoms are easily distinguished from the female blossoms. The stem of the male blossom is thin and trim. The stem of the female blossom is very thick. At the base of the female flower below the petals is a small bulge, which is the developing squash.

Always leave a few male blossoms on the vine for pollination purposes. There are always many more male flowers than female. The female blossom can be harvested with a tiny squash growing at the end and used in recipes along with full blossoms. Use the blossom of any variety of summer or winter squash in your favorite squash blossom recipe.

Use pruning shears or a sharp knife to cut squash blossoms at midday when the petals are open, leaving one inch of the stem. Gently rinse in a pan of cool water and store in ice water in the refrigerator until ready to use. The flowers can be stored for a few hours or up to 1-2 days. If you've never eaten squash blossoms, you are in for a treat.

Source: University of Illinois Extension



Image by Gardening Know How

Stuffed Squash Blossoms (Serves 4)

The Batter

- 1 cup flour
- ½ cup cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup fat-free chilled milk, beer or water

The Stuffing

- ¼ cup ricotta cheese
- 1 garlic clove, minced or pressed
- ¼ teaspoon each salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons mushrooms, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh basil or parsley, minced
- 16 large squash blossoms, washed
- Canola oil for frying

Prepare the batter first. Sift together dry ingredients, then whisk in milk, beer or cold water until smooth. Cover and set in the refrigerator for 30 minutes. Leftover batter can be stored for up to two days.

Meanwhile, prepare the stuffing. In a bowl, combine the ricotta cheese, garlic, salt, pepper, mushrooms and basil. Open the blossoms and spoon about one ½ teaspoon of the mixture into the center of each. Avoid overfilling. Twist the top of each blossom together to close. Place on a baking sheet and refrigerate for 15 minutes.

Pour the oil into a skillet to a depth of ½ inch. Heat over high heat until a small cube of bread dropped into the oil turns golden brown within seconds.

Briefly dip each stuffed blossom into the batter, then carefully slip into the hot oil. Cook until golden on all sides, about three minutes total cooking time. Add only as many blossoms at a time as will fit comfortably in the skillet. Transfer with a slotted utensil to paper towels to drain briefly.

If desired sprinkle with salt, and serve immediately.

Source: University of Illinois Extension

Home Preservation

Canning squash is not recommended because the tender summer squash will simply turn to mush during processing, unless you are making pickles. Zucchini can be substituted for cucumbers in some pickle recipes.

Blanch and freeze cubes or slices of summer squash or grate and freeze Zucchini, unblanched for making Zucchini bread. The best way to use overgrown (10 to 12 inches) zucchini is to grate and use in zucchini bread. Cut the squash in half lengthwise and cut away the seedy middle section. Wash, grate and freeze in one cup portions. Use zip closure freezer bags or rigid freezer containers leaving ½ inch head space. Oversize zucchini can also be used to make canned zucchini chutney. The over 12 inch size monsters should go on the compost heap.



How to Freeze Squash

Blanching

Summer squash, like most vegetables, must be blanched before they can be frozen.

Blanching stops enzyme actions that can cause loss of flavor, color and texture. Blanching works best if you heat 1 gallon of water to boiling in a large pot fitted with a wire basket or colander.

Wash and cut summer squash into 1/2-inch slices, or grate flesh for baking use. Add no more than 1 pound of squash (4-6 cups) to the boiling water. If the water does not return to a boil within 30 seconds to 1 minute, then you added too much. Once the water returns to a boil, blanch squash for three (3) minutes (4 minutes at elevations greater than 3,500 feet).

After three (3) minutes, remove the squash, using the basket or colander, and plunge pieces into cold water or ice water. The quicker the slices or grated squash cool, the more crispness they will retain.

Freezing

Fill pint or quart size freezer bags almost full.

Squeeze out the excess air. Or, tightly pack rigid freezer containers leaving a ½ - 1 inch headspace. For all containers: seal, label and freeze. To freeze squash slices so that they do not stick together, place them in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Cover with plastic wrap and freeze solid. Once the slices are solid, place them into freezer bags or rigid freezer containers.



Summer Squash Recipes

Zucchini Carrot Bread

To use frozen zucchini in bread, thaw the package in a pan of cold water, squeeze out excess water and precede with the recipe.

Ingredients:

1½ cups all-purpose flour
1 cup sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
1 egg, slightly beaten
½ cup canola oil
1 cup grated zucchini
½ cup grated carrots
½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans
Powdered Sugar (optional)

Directions:

1. In a large mixing bowl stir together flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and ginger. Set aside.
2. In a medium bowl, beat the egg, add the oil, grated zucchini, and grated carrots. Mix well.
3. Add the zucchini mixture and nuts to the flour mixture. Stir only until all the flour is incorporated. Do not over mix or the bread will be dry and chewy.
4. Pour the batter into a well greased 9-inch bread pan and bake in a preheated 375° oven for 50 minutes.
5. Remove from the oven and let the bread cool in the pan 5 minutes, then turn out onto a rack or plate. Serve warm or cool and dust with powdered sugar. Makes one 9-inch loaf.



Spicy Squash Cakes (Serves 6)

This recipe works well with a combination of zucchini and pattypan or yellow squash.

Ingredients:

3 eggs
4 cups grated summer squash
1 cup fresh corn kernels, cut from two ears
¼ cup chopped green onions, tops included
1 large jalapeno pepper, chopped
⅓ cup parmesan cheese
½ cup grated sharp cheddar cheese
½ cup all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon ground cayenne or black pepper
Canola oil for sautéing

Directions:

1. In a large bowl beat the eggs. Beat in squash, corn, green onions, jalapeno, the cheeses, flour, olive oil and ground pepper.
2. Heat two tablespoons canola oil in a heavy 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat. For large cakes, use two tablespoons of squash mixture per cake. Do not over crowd the skillet. Leave about an inch between cakes.
3. Cook until the edges turn golden brown, turn and cook the other side until golden brown, about three minutes total cooking time per cake. Transfer to a paper towel lined plate. Place in a warm over and continue cooking the remaining cakes.

Could serve with salsa and a dollop of sour cream on top. Sprinkle with salt if desired.

Summer Garden Vegetable Medley (Serves 6)

You may substitute yellow squash for zucchini or a combination of both.

Ingredients:

3 medium zucchini (7 to 8 inches) or 5 small (4 to 5 inches)
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 bell pepper or any pepper variety, seeded and cut into strips
6 trimmed, thinly sliced green onions with tops included
2 cloves garlic, chopped
2 medium tomatoes, chopped
1 teaspoon toasted cumin seeds, ground
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Directions:

1. Wash and thinly slice squash and set aside. Prepare all other vegetables and set aside.
2. To toast cumin seeds. Heat a heavy skillet over low heat. Add the cumin seeds and shake the skillet periodically. When their aroma begins to be noticed, after about 5 minutes, remove the skillet from the heat. Pour seeds into a mortar, allow to cool, then grind. Or use a spice grinder.
3. Heat a non-stick skillet or wok over medium heat. Add oil. When oil is very hot, add peppers, onions and garlic. Cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Add zucchini and tomatoes and continue cooking for 5 additional minutes.
4. Sprinkle with ground cumin seeds, salt and pepper. Serve hot or cold.