

Preferred Growing Conditions: Vegetables tend to all like the same growing conditions: full sun, and well drained soil full of organic matter. Organic matter, organic matter, organic matter... Are you sick of hearing about it yet? Organic matter contributes to the health of the soil: gives soil nutrients, aerates soil for better root growth, helps soil retain moisture, and while at the same times allows soil to drain better.

So, for the health of your plants, make sure your soil has organic matter. I wouldn't keep saying it if it weren't important. Trust me. The easiest way to add organic matter is to just work a little compost into your soil. Get a composter and make your own by recycling kitchen and yard waste. Or, buy compost or a soil amendment will do the same thing. But, it's cheaper just to go ahead and buy a compost bin and make your own.

How to Plant Summer Squash: Rethink how many summer squash plants you need. It just takes a few plants to feed a family. Plant summer squash in a container, or a garden. Here's how: For planting summer squash in containers, make sure your pot is at least 12 inches wide, that's about a 5 gallon pot. Pots will dry out fast. That will be your biggest container gardening obstacle. Consider using a fabric pot or a self watering planter, so help control the soil moisture level. Here are detailed directions to growing squash in containers.

Soil temperature should be about 70 degrees Fahrenheit before you plant your summer squash. Plant seeds ½ inches deep and six inches apart. Thin out after seedlings after they emerge, but will need at least two leaves to keep growing. Mature bush summer squash plants should be 20 inches apart in rows that are spaced 2 feet apart. If growing a vine variety, planting in hills works well. Plant about 5 seeds per hill. After seedlings emerge and are established, thin to three plants. Stake or provide a trellis for vining varieties.

Transplanting is a good idea with summer squash, too. You can purchase starter plants or start seeds indoors about four weeks prior to the last frost date. Don't forget to harden off your seedlings, meaning slowly adjust them to the outdoor climate and sun.

Consider staggering your plantings of summer squash too. Planting two weeks apart can keep you harvesting summer squash a little longer. And, don't forget you get a lot of summer squash from one plant. I think that is why sometimes squash gets a bad rap. It's a great tasting vegetable, and easy to grow. But, I think folks get tired of eating all that squash. Squash for dinner, again?

Maintaining Your Summer Squash Plants: Consistent watering is key with summer squash. Mulch helps a lot with maintaining soil moisture. So, put a good layer of mulch down around summer squash plants. Provide a trellis for support for vining summer squashes to grow.

You might need to assist with pollination. If you are growing just a few plants, you might have to help. Here's how to do it, and no, you probably didn't learn this in school. The first flowers that bloom are males. These appear about 40-50 days after planting. A week later the female flowers develop, which will produce the fruit after fertilized by the male flowers. So, to help: pick the first male blooms and brush them against the female bloom. This will help increase the output of summer squash. Growing the larger globe varieties of squash, like the Gourmet Globe? Put a barrier between the ground and the squash to prevent rot.

Harvesting Summer Squash: Harvest summer squash early. They will taste better when tender, and you'll want to keep the fruit off the plant so it keeps producing. So, pick when the summer squash is about 2 inches in diameter, or 6-8 inches long.

Summer Squash Pests and Diseases: Don't forget to check summer squash plants for pests often. Squash bugs will set in pretty quickly. They will be your biggest pest problems. Ok, cucumber beetles like summer squash plants, too. Neem oil is a great organic choice to get rid of these bugs.

Keep an eye out, too, for these pests and diseases: bacteria wilt, squash vine borers, mosaic virus, and mildew.