



# SEEDS

Socio-Economic & Environmental Development Solutions

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## How to Grow Acorn Squash

Days to germination: 7 to 12 days Days to harvest: 80 to 100 days Light requirements: Full sun Water requirements: Regular watering Soil: Loose, fertile and well-draining soil Container: Only in very large pots, but definitely suitable

### **Introduction**

One of the many varieties of winter squash, acorn squash produces small, dark green fruits that are somewhat shaped like an acorn.

Like other hard-shelled winter squash, acorn squash usually eaten cooked though it's slowly gaining more popularity as a raw vegetable. The vitamin content of an acorn squash includes high quantities of A and C, and minerals like potassium and manganese. Add in a load of fiber, and you'll find yourself a very healthy vegetable.

## **Starting from Seed**

You do have the option of either starting your seeds indoors, or sowing them right out into the garden. Many gardeners do choose to get their seedlings going inside for later transplant because you can't sow outdoors until the soil has warmed up and there is no chance of frost.

Indoors, start your seeds about 3 to 4 weeks before you expect to have your last spring frost. In that time, your seedlings will get too large for the typical little seed trays. To save yourself an extra step of transplanting, start your seeds in larger pots (about 3 inches across). Plant seeds about an inch under the soil, and keep your pots warm until the seeds sprout.

You can plant 3 to 5 seeds in each pot, then thin down to 2 or 3 strong seedlings. When you transplant later, the plants can just stay together in each hill.

## **Transplanting**

Your seedlings can be transplanted about 2 weeks after the last frost of the season. Soil should be warm, so if you've had cold weather you can even put off the planting for another week if necessary.

Squash need a lot of room, so you'll have to sacrifice a large part of your garden for your acorn squash. At least 3 feet in all directions around each hill of plants. You can still grow 2 or 3 plants per hill because the vines will just intertwine, allowing the plants to "share" the space.

For seeds going out on their own, plant them at the same time as you would put out transplants (2 weeks after frost date). Space them out the same as you would with the seedlings, but you can start a few more seeds than you need in each hill and thin down after they start to sprout.

To save space, you can grow acorn squash vertically on a trellis or fence. If you want to grow them like this, don't plant your seeds or seedlings in hills. Go with a row, and 2 to 2-and-a-half feet between each plant. Your trellis system will have to be sturdy to hold the growing squash, as they will get pretty heavy later in the season.

### **Growing Instructions**

Once your plants start to grow, their broad leaves will shade out many weeds, making maintenance fairly easy. Until then, keep the squash patch well weeded and water when the soil starts to dry out.

Protect your squash as they begin to grow. If your plants are growing on the ground, you can place a coffee can lid or something similar under each growing squash to protect it from the damp soil underneath. Squash on a trellis won't need this, but you will definitely have to tie the squash to the supports as they grow. The plant won't be able to support the fruits when growing upward.

When the cool weather comes in, you will want to make the most of your last few squash. If your vines are still making flowers, pull them off as you find them. That will make your plants use their resources to finish growing your existing squash fruits rather than starting new ones that will never

mature in time.

## **Containers**

As one of the smaller winter squash varieties, acorn squash work fine in containers providing the pots are large enough. Plant each plant in a container around 5 gallons large, and either let the vines trail over the sides, or plan on having a trellis.

Your best option for container growing is to plant a bush variety, such as Table King. It might still need some support, but the bushy shape is more compact than the vining plants.

## **Pests and Diseases**

Your biggest threats will be leaf-eating insects like the striped cucumber beetle or the squash bug. Either one can do significant damage to your plants, so you need to watch out. They are large and easy to spot, though you should look under the large leaves and inside the blossoms too. Pick them off by hand as you find them, and regularly spritz your squash plants with a natural insecticide.

Insects like vine borers are more sneaky, and can chew the stalks at the ground level. Watch for wilting leaves (even after watering), that is the surest sign of borers. Pull up the plants immediately, and cut open the stalks. If you see small grubs, then that's the problem. You can't really do much about them once they are inside the plant, so pull any dying plants immediately so they don't spread.

## **Harvest and Storage**

One average acorn squash will weigh between 1 and 3 pounds, and each vine will give you 4 or 5 of them. Unlike other summer squashes (like zucchini) you shouldn't try picking acorn squash while they are small and young. They need to grow until their maturity date for the flesh inside to be edible.

This also means, that you won't be harvesting on and off through the season, but rather have a large bunch of squash come ripe at the same time. It's a good idea to plan ahead so you don't let any go to waste.

So leave your squash on the vine until they are mature, even if that means they aren't picked until after the first frost. But after that first frost, you will have to get outside and harvest.

For your immediate use, an acorn squash will store fine in the fridge for 2 to 3 weeks. All winter squash are well-suited to longer storage because of their thick skins. To keep your squash for a few months, let them dry well in the sun before storage and keep them in a dark, cool and dry place.