



## Cooperative Extension Service

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### Wonderful Winter Squash

As the days shorten and temperatures begin to cool, I start craving warm, hearty meals—those that are as good for the soul as they are for the body. Meals made with winter squash offer a great combination of this comfort in addition to good nutrition.

Winter squash are part of the Cucurbit family, the same family as cucumbers and melons. They grow well in most parts of the country (even here in Wyoming!)—needing warm daytime temperatures and ~90 growing days to fully mature (depending on the variety). Common winter squash varieties are acorn, delicate, spaghetti and butternut. Lesser known (but equally delicious) are banana, buttercup, calabaza, cushaw, Hubbard, kabocha, kuri, sweet dumpling and turban squash.

Winter squash differ from summer squash (zucchini and yellow varieties) in that they are allowed to fully ripen and mature on the vine. The seeds are mature (and delicious!) and the rind hardened, allowing the squash to be stored throughout the winter season. If properly cut and cured from the vine, most winter squash can be stored up to six months in a cool (~50 degrees), dry location. Any squash that are cut, bruised, or allowed to freeze should be eaten quickly as they will not keep.

Winter squash come in many shades of yellow to dark orange in color. This is an excellent indicator of the variety of nutrients they offer. They are great sources of fiber, vitamin C, potassium, and beta carotene (vitamin A), and also contain significant amounts of niacin and iron.

Preparing squash may seem like a daunting task if you haven't taken it on before, but they are actually quite forgiving (read: hard to mess up). Most squash cook nicely by simply cutting in half, scooping out the seeds and stringy insides, and baking on a baking sheet, cut side down, at 350°F for 45+ minutes or until squash can be pierced easily with a knife. Because winter squash often have tough outer shells, care must be taken when cutting or halving these squash. A heavy chef's knife or cleaver should be used and often a mallet is needed to hit the back of the knife to break into the squash. Make sure to maintain sharp knife blades to avoid slippage and accidents.

After baking, allow squash to cool to touch and then scoop out flesh to be eaten as-is or incorporated into your favorite recipe. Cooked squash lends itself nicely to stews, soups and casseroles as well as quick breads, muffins and even pies. It can even be used as a substitute for a portion of the fat in baked goods like muffins and quick breads. Remember to save the seeds and toast them in an oven on a low setting. Season with salt or your favorite herbs and enjoy plain, sprinkled on a salad, or as garnish on top of your squash soup.

*The source for this article was Jennifer Jacobsen, R.D., UW Nutrition and Food Safety Educator, West Area. Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University of Wyoming Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Northeast Wyoming. He can be reached via email at [kwillis3@uwyo.edu](mailto:kwillis3@uwyo.edu).*