

Winter Squash Explained

All Squash are members of the *Cucurbitaceae* family and are relatives of both melons and cucumbers. They appear in many forms from round and smaller than a softball to large ovoids that can be difficult to lift. While each variety has a unique shape, color, size and flavor, they all share common characteristics.



Star Tribune

Squash are categorized into summer and winter varieties. Summer squash, like zucchini and pattypan have tender skin and flesh with small, edible seeds and high moisture content. The entire vegetable, including its flesh, seeds and skin, is edible. Winter squash is the term used for squashes with relatively hard skin, including butternut, acorn and spaghetti. Almost all winter squash have a hard, inedible peel and tough-skinned seeds that must be roasted before eating. Winter squash will hold the longest at 55°F and 60% relative humidity. The higher the temperature, the faster the squash will lose weight and moisture from respiration. Temperatures below 50°F risk cold damage to the squash, which will shorten storage lifespan. Uncut squash should keep for up to three months or longer in a cool dry place; pumpkins will only keep for about one month.

Following is a guide to some flavorful and versatile winter squashes:



Acorn – The most widely available winter squash. Has a mostly dark green skin with some orange and smooth, sweet flesh. The scalloped shape makes a beautiful presentation when sliced cross-wise. As the name suggests, its shape resembles that of an acorn. This squash can also be found with a white or golden color, but the green is most common. Acorn has the lowest beta carotene content of all the winter squashes. Chefs Todd Porter and Diane Cu prepare [Mustard-Stewed Acorn Squash with Chicken](#) as a satisfying winter main course.

Baby Acorn - The entire squash is edible and the skin is thin and tender. Can be steamed, sautéed, baked, roasted or grilled. Try scoring the outer skin just down to the flesh, then marinating in any combination of olive oil, fresh herbs, pepper, garlic etc.

Black Futsu - Popular with European market growers, this rare, black Japanese squash has a flattened top and round shape with deep, voluptuous ribs. The golden flesh has the rich taste of hazelnuts. Weighing about three to eight lbs. each, the black fruit will turn a deep chestnut color in storage and will keep up to eight months. This heirloom variety is originally from Japan and has a unique appearance and uncommon flavor. Roasting the Futsu squash brings out the nutty flavor and the skin becomes soft and edible.

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Butternut - This variety is very popular because of its sweet, moist, nutty taste. The tan rind is thin enough to peel off with a vegetable peeler. It's popular in soups and stews.

Calabaza – Also known as a West Indian pumpkin, calabaza squash is brightly orange colored with smooth, finely textured meat; can also be found with green, yellow or cream colored skin. This is a versatile addition to soups, cookies, cakes or pies. This squash can be substituted for acorn, butternut, hubbard squash or pumpkin. Cuban-born cookbook author Maricel Presilla includes a [Pineapple and Grilled Calabaza Salad](#) in her James Beard Award winning cookbook, *Gran Cocina Latina*.



Carnival – A colorful hybrid created from sweet dumpling and acorn squashes. This squat, ribbed multicolored squash is mostly golden with orange and green stripes. The colors in the rind are the result of seasonal temperature variations—warmer weather results in more green striations. Roasting is the best way to prepare carnival squashes for stews, risottos, or pasta dishes. Cut in half, it can be utilized as an edible vessel, as it's the perfect size for an individual portion.

Carnival squash

Delicata – Also called Bohemian squash, although considered a hard squash, the skin is edible when steamed or roasted. It's creamy pulp tastes like a cross between a sweet potato and butternut squash and it is distinguished by it's oblong shape. The delicata has pale yellow skin with medium green or orange striations. They make an attractive daisy-like presentation when cut cross-wise before roasting. Mario Batali and Nancy Silverton's [Pizzeria Mozza](#) in Los Angeles serves Roasted Delicata Squash with Sage and Brown Butter as part of their antipasti menu.



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Kabocha -Commonly called Japanese pumpkin, Kabocha is firm with a knobby, mat skin that's deep green with light green to white stripes. Shaped like a squatty pumpkin, the flesh is an intense yellow-orange color. The flavor is a combination of sweet potato and pumpkin. The cooked skin can be eaten, too. Try [Soy Braised Kabocha Squash](#) as a hearty side dish.

Red Kuri - Medium sized and round with a tapered end, this is a thick-skinned, orange colored squash that looks like a pumpkin with a topknot, but without the ridges. Under its deep orange shell is mild flavored flesh with a somewhat dry texture and a delicate, subtle flavor similar to chestnuts. Legendary chef Alice Waters has created [Red Kuri Squash Soup](#) that takes advantage of this squash's nutty flavor.



Spaghetti Squash – Also called vegetable spaghetti, the skin of this large squash ranges in color from ivory to yellow or orange. Its center contains many large seeds. The flesh is bright yellow and is solid when raw, like other winter squashes. When steamed or baked, the flesh falls away from the outer skin in ribbons or strands like spaghetti.

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Most winter squash are interchangeable with flesh and flavor. Varieties like Hubbard, Sweet Dumpling, Golden Nugget, Turban and all the Pumpkin types can be used for similar recipes and as substitutes for most of the above mentioned types. Bon Appetit!

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