

<http://www.grit.com/farm-and-garden/heirloom-winter-squash-zm0z12mjzreg.aspx>

Winter Squash, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Of the fall and winter storage vegetables, winter squash is one of the easiest to grow, one of the few to form aboveground, and the only one that is actually a fruit. The fruit itself is known as a pepo — a modified or epigynous berry.

Many heirloom winter squash fruits are classified as small — under 5 to 6 pounds. All the plants are prodigious when it comes to vining, in some varieties a bit less so than their larger cousins. Heirloom semibush varieties exist, represented by summer squash, and clever plant breeders have created modern bush winter squashes.

One of the difficulties with hybrid winter squash is that the fruit often outweighs the everyday needs of a modern household, reaching 15 to 30 pounds or more.

Squash are a member of the Cucurbitaceae family, which consists of more than 800 species and is populated by such relatives as gourds, watermelons, cucumbers, winter melons, cantaloupes and gherkins. Generally these are vining plants of tropical or semitropical origin from the Old and New World. In other words, they like warmth and are frost sensitive. The *Cucurbita* genus is characterized by about 20 New World species, four of which are familiar to most of us through their edible fruits, including the pepo squash.

Native Squash Species

Many wild species are native to North America, especially Mexico. In the United States, these include *Cucurbita foetidissima* or the Missouri gourd; *Cucurbita digitata* or the finger-leaved gourd; *Cucurbita palmata* or the coyote melon; *Cucurbita texana* or Texas gourd; and the wild *Cucurbita pepo*.

Cucurbita pepo are classically thought of as the orange pumpkins and other winter squash such as acorn, spaghetti and delicata. Summer squash varieties including yellow summer squash, zucchini, pattypan, and bush scallop are part of the same group.

Pepo squash most likely originated in Mexico about 10,000 years ago and were of the orange type, and then again about 4,000 to 5,000 years ago in eastern North America. This second domestication produced pepo squash varieties that possess green, white and yellow skin and originated from the Ozark wild gourd, a weedy, inedible, orange gourd known to grow wild in Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Alabama, Illinois, Tennessee and Louisiana. It wasn't until the late 1980s that researchers discovered these were the ancestors of eastern North American squash from which Native Americans developed new varieties.

Generally the flesh of this group is eaten, although pumpkin seeds are often roasted and eaten coated with salt or dehulled to produce pepitas. A number of varieties are cultivated that produce hull-less or naked seeds. This includes the Styrian pumpkin cultivated for its oil seed in parts of

Eastern Europe for more than 100 years; the oil is used sparingly for culinary purposes with reputed medicinal and health benefits.

Heirloom Winter Squash Varieties: Down to Specifics

Many pepo squash are excellent keepers. I have had fruits of acorn squash last into June, and they reliably keep until spring.

One of the smaller pumpkins that has gained considerable notoriety in recent years is Winter Luxury Pie, first introduced in 1893 by the Philadelphia seed company, Johnson and Stokes, and in 1894 by Livingston Seed Co. as Livingston's Pie Squash. As the story goes, it was found in a field by one of Livingston's customers and cultivated by him for many years. It is uniquely netted (white) somewhat like a cantaloupe, without strongly pronounced ribs, and was originally golden yellow.

The current orange variety was introduced in 1920 by Gill Bros. Like most pumpkins, it forms fairly large plants, yielding three or four fruits per vine. Small for a pumpkin, the fruit can weigh up to 8 pounds in good soil, though many specimens are smaller. While it exceeds my criteria for a small squash, it is worth noting for its distinct pumpkin quality. Winter Luxury Pie is without a doubt a wonderful eating pumpkin with moderately sweet, thick flesh that makes excellent pies.

Another pumpkin of note is the Small Sugar, otherwise known as New England Pie Pumpkin, which remains quite popular in the Northeast. This pumpkin is classically orange, with a globe shape flattened at the bottom and visible ribbing.

Its history is unclear, although it was popularly cultivated by 1860 in New England and was the preeminent variety recommended for pies in the 19th century and early 20th century. Fruits are smaller than Winter Luxury, around 5 pounds and as small as 3 pounds. The flesh is smooth, moderately sweet and makes good pumpkin pies. The small size also makes it suitable for table arrangements and soup bowls, albeit for one-time use.

Introduced in 1894 by Peter Henderson and Co. of New York, Delicata — aka Sweet Potato or Peanut — was touted as one of the earliest maturing vine squash. The fruits are small, pale yellow, cylindrical, and ribbed with green stripes in the furrows that turn orange during storage. The fairly thin skin is somewhat edible, and the flesh is orange and sweet. They are 1 to 2 pounds, although large specimens may reach 3 pounds.

Delicata and its related types quickly went out of fashion shortly after introduction, perhaps because of the small size and thin flesh. They typically keep for just a few months.

During the last couple of decades, they have been widely grown and are thus well-known. *American Cookery: The Boston Cooking-School Magazine* from 1918 suggests they be served on toast like asparagus, in cream sauce, or au gratin with cheese sauce. Because of their small size and sweetness, they can be sliced, steamed and ready for action in 10 minutes, which is my favorite method of preparation and consumption.

Table Queen acorn squash was introduced in 1913 by the Iowa Seed Co. of Des Moines. While the exact origination of this squash is unclear, the type is considerably older than the 20th

century. The famous North Dakota seedsman Oscar H. Will, great-grandfather of GRIT's editor in chief, mentions that the Native American Arikara people grew a similar squash that wasn't quite equal in quality.

Illustrations of acorn or closely related types of squash are included in European herbals as early as 1562 by Leonhart Fuchs, who depicted a white acorn. Early writers such as Thomas Hariot and Charles de L'Ecluse described these as *Virginia macocqwer* or *macocks*, and John Gerard (1636) as a kind of *pompion* (pumpkin) but smaller, with a blackish green color when ripe. These varieties were developed by Native Americans in the eastern portion of the country.

Most of us are familiar with the prominently ribbed, tapering, acorn-like fruits that are black-green except for a light orange where the fruits contact the ground, which gradually turn entirely orange during storage. Fruits typically weigh 1 to 2 pounds and keep well throughout the winter.

The flesh is somewhat dry, a bit fibrous, and moderately sweet. Any deficit is easily cured by a bit of maple syrup and butter. I like them baked face-up with a bit of water in a deep baking pan at 350 degrees, until the flesh is soft and slightly browned.

A possible progeny of the Fuchs squash is a cream-color variety known as Thelma Sanders Sweet Potato that was a family heirloom from Adair County, Missouri, grown by its namesake and entered into seed preservation circles in the late 1980s. It has become popular with heirloom aficionados and is considered to be heavy yielding, relatively insect- and disease-resistant, with a great chestnut-like sweet flavor, decidedly different from green acorn types.

White acorn types were grown in the early 20th century and did not become popular.

All of these heirloom winter squash varieties are easy to locate, well worth growing, and a great source of winter eating pleasure.