

Harvest of Pumpkin and Winter Squash

Pumpkins and winter squash both begin to mature beginning in late September and continue to ripen into the cooler fall months. Examples of winter squash include; Royal Acorn, Ebony Acorn, and Table Queen, Butternut (several hybrid varieties), Improved Green Hubbard, Pink Banana, Striped Cushaw, Spaghetti Squash. Both pumpkins and winter squash can be harvested, cured and stored in similar ways—unlike the harvest and storage of most other vegetables.

As with other fruit (pumpkins and squash are botanically fruit), it is vitally important to make sure your pumpkins or squash are fully mature before harvest. As they develop, a thick skin, or rind will develop. A layer of wax also develops over the skin to prevent the fruit from drying out after harvest. If harvested too soon, the fruit may decompose prematurely in storage.

To test the rind's thickness, try to penetrate the fruit's skin with your thumbnail. If your nail easily penetrates, the fruit is not mature. If your nail is met with firm resistance, it is time to harvest. Keep in mind that the rind of a pumpkin and most winter squash will likely give if you push hard enough with your nail. You're looking for firm resistance, not an impenetrable layer.

The second important harvest factor is color. For pumpkins and most of the winter squash this means no sign of green on the skin. The exception of course are those squash whose mature color is green. Fruit that lay on the ground may have a green color where they touch the soil. If beauty is a concern (as with pumpkins for decoration) rotate the fruit as it grows, being careful not to break it from the stem.

Pumpkins and winter squash do not easily separate from their vines the way many other vegetables do. Instead of pulling by hand, use pruning shears to cut the fruit from the vine. Pulling the stem from the vine often results in the stem breaking leaving a scar on the top of the fruit. This scar can be an entry point for pests and diseases. After you cut the stem, it will dry on the fruit and act as a protective barrier for the remainder of the fruit's time in storage.

After harvest, it is important to cure both pumpkins and winter squash. Curing is an important process that triggers the fruit to enter a state that will be suitable for long term storage. Curing helps heal scratches, thicken the skin and can improve the fruit's quality and flavor. Uncured fruits sometimes have a 'green' or under ripe taste even after weeks or months in storage.

To cure, find a warm location with some humidity. Temperatures from 80-90 degrees, but fully shaded, works well. Store the fruit for the first two weeks following harvest. Then move the fruit to a slightly cooler location for another two weeks. After that, the fruit may be moved to its long term storage.

Pumpkins and winter squash should be kept in a cool location, between 50-60 degrees over the winter. In storage, pumpkins and squash should keep for 4-8 months. Squash with harder rinds may store more than 10 months. After one month in storage (after proper curing) the fruit will have an improved texture and flavor over those consumed directly after harvest or curing.

During storage, it is important to continue to monitor both pumpkins and winter squash. Some of the surface blemishes may have hardened while others may rot. Carefully examine each fruit and remove any with soft spots or oozing. If rotting fruit is kept with healthy fruit it can cause the healthy fruit to begin to decay. If the blemishes are minor (perhaps only discoloration) remove those fruit and set them aside for closer monitoring or first consumption.