

## ZUCCHINI



Zucchini is a variety of summer squash. They are tender and tasty when young, but most varieties tend to become tasteless when large and overgrown.

In Yuma County, zucchini is a rather minor crop, with only about 50 acres in production. The squash are planted in early March for a early May harvest.

Mild bitterness in zucchini, like that found in cucumber, may be result from environmental factors such as high temperature, low moisture, low soil nutrients, etc. The bitterness is caused by compounds called cucurbitacins. There is also a rare condition which can cause extreme bitterness in zucchini. A compound called *Cucurbitacin E* is found in wild species of squash, but is extremely rare in cultivated species.

Since zucchini plants are prolific producers, early settlers found various ways to use the squash, such as making bread out of zucchini. Zucchini bread is classified as a quick bread and was not developed in the United States until the end of the 19th century. Pearlash, a refined form of potash, was used as a form of baking powder to produce carbon dioxide gas during the dough making process. The zucchini bread was first made in America in the 19th century when housewives used pearlash as a chemical leavening agent.

While pumpkins and winter squash have been popular in the United States since the time of the Pilgrims, the most common squash grown today has only been popular in the United States for the last 50 years. The zucchini was introduced to this country in the mid 1900's by the Italians and is now grown by more gardeners than any other squash.

In Mexico, the zucchini flowers are often preferred over the fruit and are frequently cooked in soups or used for quesadillas.

Summer squashes, and all zucchini varieties, are native to the Americas and belong to the family of curcurbita. They are actually part of the gourd family. They are native to Central America and Mexico and are grown throughout the United States during the warm, frost free seasons.

Zucchini squash is the favored jewel of the summer squashes. Its flavor is light and sweet with flesh as delicate as a flower and texture that makes it almost melt in the mouth. Zucchini's many varieties offer the countless opportunities to prepare a varied menu of colorful summer dishes.

Archaeologists have traced Zucchini origins to Mexico, dating back from 7,000 to 5,500 BCE, when they were an integral part of the ancient diet of maize, beans, and squashes. That pre-Columbian food trio is still the mainstay of the Mexican cuisine and is known today as the "three sisters."

Many explorers who came to the Americas brought back what they considered strange foods. The zucchini eventually found its way to Italy where it was named zucchini. Many names have been given to this squash. The French call it courgette, a name that has been adopted by the English. The English also refer to a variety that is slightly larger and plumper as marrow.

The colonists of New England adopted the name squash, a word derived from several Native American words for the vegetable which meant "something eaten raw." George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were squash enthusiasts who really enjoyed growing them.

If left on the vine or bush longer, the zucchini becomes enormous, the seeds larger, tougher, and sometimes inedible, and the flavor is less sweet. Cocozelle, a variety of zucchini that originated in Italy, is shorter, plumper, and striped. Today's researchers are developing hybrids that are a visual delight. Some are round, some are yellow, some a combination of green and yellow, and some are a cross between zucchini and the fluted patty pan squash.

With their high water content (more than 95 percent), zucchini squashes are

very low in calories. There are only 13 calories in a half-cup of raw zucchini, with a slight increase to 18 calories in the same quantity cooked. Nutritionally, zucchinis offer valuable antioxidants. Zucchini is a good source of Vitamins A and C, Potassium, and is low in calories making it an excellent choice for dieters.

Zucchini squash grow most commonly in cylindrical shapes, but also in round and intermediate shapes. Fruit color varies from a green so dark as to be near black, to lighter shades of green both with and without stripes, all the way to tones of yellow. Many are highlighted with various degrees of speckling.

Zucchini is very easily grown and almost all zucchini farmers are presented with a surplus of the crop every year. Based on this excess supply, zucchini are often incorporated into other dishes, unlike other squash. Bakeries will often serve zucchini bread or muffins. They can also be chopped up and incorporated into sauces or soups.

Zucchini has four notable qualities: it is abundant, it is low in calories, it is a good source of fiber and versatile!

Store fresh picked or purchased zucchini in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to one week for best quality. Be sure the zucchini is dry when you put it in the bag as moisture will encourage mold and spoilage.

Zucchini is best if cooked when fresh and small as it will have more moisture. Steaming produces the crispest, least soggy vegetable. If using zucchini in a casserole recipe, it may be par-boiled or steamed to remove some of the moisture. Or make allowances of the amount of moisture to avoid having an extra, runny result!

There are different zucchini varieties, however most people recognize it as the cucumber equivalent of the squash world. It is a thin skinned summer squash, and its mild taste and texture blends in well with most dinner plans.

There is ample archaeological evidence to show that the diverse varieties of squash and pumpkins grown today throughout the world originated from wild Cucurbita gourds cultivated in the

Americas for thousands of years by native Indians. According to Smithsonian archeologist Bruce Smith and archaeologist Wesley Cowan of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, a variety of squash native to the Ozark region of Arkansas and Missouri may be the living ancestor of today's many varieties of summer squash and related gourds. Their research indicates that it was cultivated in this area by native Indians more than 3,000 years ago.

The cucurbit family is somewhat confusing because of the great diversity in this family which includes pumpkins, squashes and ornamental gourds. Flowering is monoecious, separate male and female flowers, so bees must pollinate each female flower before a plant can set fruit. Because bees can carry pollen from any number of squash cousins, the crosses can be quite interesting if seeds are planted the following year. Such a cross resulted in the delightful winter squash Swan White Bale Queen a few years ago.

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