

Squash, Zucchini—*Cucurbita pepo* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

Zucchini squash in recent years has overtaken other types of summer squash in popularity as a fresh and cooked vegetable. It is found in almost every garden throughout Florida and on salad bars everywhere as a fresh sliced delicacy. In Windsor, a small community in North Central Florida, the Annual Zucchini Festival someday may be the town's main claim to fame.

Description

Zucchini is represented by several named varieties (cultivars). Fruits of this member of the Italian marrow squashes 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.

Cylindrical fruits range in average size from the 5–6 inch 'Caserta' to the longer varieties such as 'Cocozelle' that reaches 14–16 inches in length. Most varieties average 3–4 inches in diameter.

Gardeners like to see just how big their zucchinis will grow if left on the plant. Specimens in excess of 20 inches in length and 10 pounds in weight are common. Leaves of zucchini also are quite large, with more notches per leaf than crookneck and straightneck squash. Zucchini leaves also are characterized by having light greenish gray splotches and streaks on the leaf surface. These light markings are sometimes mistaken for a mildew problem.



Figure 1. Zucchini squash.
Credits: Pablo Oliveri, CC BY-SA 2.5

Like other members of the summer squash group, the zucchini plant has the bush habit rather than the vining habit of the winter squashes. However, within the bush habit, there is a fairly wide range of variations in general plant character, primarily in density and arrangement of leaves.

Varieties may be classified as to bush habit, with a rating of (1) given to the open habit, where the leaves are more sprawling and less cluttered, and a rating of (5) for the most dense habit of upright crowded leaves (closed). Five varieties rated in one test were: 'Burpee Hybrid' (1.0), 'Blackini' (2.0), 'Hyzelle' (4.0), 'Hyzini' (4.5), and 'Black Zucchini' (5.0). Other varieties of the more open habit are 'Ambassador,' 'Blackjack,' 'El Dorado,' 'Grey,' 'Ball's Zucchini,' and 'Caserta' (semi-open).

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Good examples of the closed bush type are: 'Seneca Gourmet,' 'Black Eagle,' 'Blackee,' 'Burpee Fordhook,' 'Long White Vegetable Marrow,' and 'Mexican Globe.' There are many varieties of zucchini offered by seed companies. Many of these zucchini varieties are hybrids (controlled crosses), and many others are open pollinated. All of them may be grouped for descriptive purposes according to fruit color. The following categories are generally recognized: (1) very dark (green-black) such as 'Blacknini'; (2) dark (dark green) such as 'Ambassador'; (3) dark green striped such as 'Cocozelle'; (4) medium green such as 'Greenbay'; (5) gray-green such as 'Caserta'; and (6) yellow such as 'Goldzini'.

Culture

Zucchini is easy to grow throughout the state. It is a warm season vegetable readily injured by frost and freezes. Plant in the fall and spring in all areas of Florida, and also in the winter in South Florida.

Plant seeds directly in the garden, or use containerized transplants. Space plants 24 inches apart (or closer if space is limited) on 36 to 48 inch wide beds. Hill planting is also feasible. Four to six plants will feed an average size family in any one growing season. Fertilize as for other garden vegetables.

Plants have both male and female flowers, a situation that requires insects (bees primarily) for pollination. If bee activity is low, female flowers are likely to drop. Midsummer growing conditions usually result in low yields in Florida.

Insects that bother zucchini in some Florida gardens include leafminers, aphids, cutworms, squash vine borers, squash bugs, cucumber beetles, mole crickets, and fruit worms. Common diseases are downy mildew, powdery mildew, mosaic viruses, and fruit rots. Occasional injury results from root-knot nematodes.

Crossing with other nearby varieties of squash occurs readily. No harm is done, however, unless the seeds are to be saved and planted. Crossing will occur with straightnecks, crooknecks, spaghetti squash, pumpkins, and others.

Use

Most fruits are ready about 40 to 50 days after seeding, depending on variety. Harvest zucchini when young and tender, usually when 6–8 inches long and about 2 to 3 inches around. Some varieties may be edible even at the larger sizes. Keep fruits removed from the plant to encourage other fruits to form.

Zucchini has a stronger, more zesty flavor than the summer crooknecks and straightnecks. A favorite way to enjoy zucchini is to eat it raw either in a salad or as a party dip. Its main nutritional contributions are vitamins A and C.