

# Your Guide to Winter Squash

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Nothing says “fall” like the arrival of pumpkins and winter squash at market stands and in produce departments across the state. The various colors, shapes and sizes *scream* fall and are easily incorporated into your indoor and outdoor decorations. But squash is more than just a long lasting decoration piece for your home. They are, after all, meant to be eaten! Where do we begin though?! Like any variety of produce, the various winter squashes differ in flavor profile and best use. Read on for an intuitive visual guide to 12 of the most popular squash varieties and find your new favorite!



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**Let's Talk Squash.** Pumpkins get a lot of glory when it comes to the months surrounding Halloween, but they aren't the only nutrient-packed winter squash variety available to consumers to brighten up your fall and winter meals. Winter squash is often sweeter, denser and has more texture than favorite summer squash varieties like zucchini. They are delicious in soups, casseroles, pasta and drinks and desserts!

Historically, squash was a Native American crop. The name itself comes from a Narragansett word “askutasquash” meaning “eaten raw or uncooked.” It is likely that because due to their hard shells, winter squash served as containers and utensils. The seeds and flesh became an important part of the native diet in both South and North America as time went on.

Native American tribes in the northeast United States grew pumpkin varieties, yellow crooknecks, patty pans and Boston marrows. Southern tribes raised cushaws and green and white striped potato squashes. The squash was boiled or roasted and young shoots, leaves, flowers and seeds were all consumed.

When pilgrims first arrived in North America, they were left unimpressed with squash until they were required to survive their first winter. At this time, pumpkins and squash became staples in their diet as well! Traditionally, pilgrims baked their squash and flavored them with maple syrup and honey. For pie, pilgrims would hollow a pumpkin, fill it with apples, sugar, spices and milk, then replace the stem and bake!

**It’s good for you.** Winter squash is one of the richest sources of important, plant-based anti-inflammatory nutrients like omega 3s and beta-carotene. These are especially important for keeping the immune system healthy and protecting you from colds and flu. In fact, winter squash is one of the highest food sources for alpha-carotene, beta-carotene, and lutein, three health supportive carotenoids! It has high levels of Vitamins A and C and provides great antioxidant support as well. Eating squash promotes overall optimal health, and we certainly could use it as we make our way into the colder months!

### Which to choose?

Were you able to name all 12 of the squash varieties in the image above? We didn’t think so! Let’s take a look.



### Kabocha Squash

This squat, green kabocha – the Japanese word for squash – has a nutty, earthy flavor and a touch a sweetness. It can be mistaken for a buttercup squash, but the key here is to check out the base. The bottom points out, not in!

### Butternut Squash

A slim neck and bulbous base give the butternut squash its recognizable and unique shape. It has a muted yellow-tan rind and bright orange-yellow flesh. Butternut squash have a sweet taste and are a favorite of many! Cut the body from the neck of the squash to make it easier to handle.





3

### Red Kabocha Squash

The red kabocha looks much like it's green cousin and has faint white stripes running from top to bottom. This red variety is noticeably sweeter than the green.

### Carnival Squash

A carnival squash is a fun hybrid between a sweet dumpling squash and an acorn squash. It's exterior represents both its parents, but the flesh is yellow, mellow and sweet. Carnival squash is a good replacement in any recipe calling for acorn or butternut squash.



4



5

### Sugar Pumpkin

Ahh, the sweet sugar pumpkin. If you have gotten a small, squat pumpkin for Halloween, chances are good that it was a sugar pumpkin. This pumpkin variety is prized for their classic pumpkin flavor, and their thick, flesh-packed insides. Use sugar pumpkins instead of canned pumpkin in your baking and prepare to have your life changed!

### Sweet Dumpling Squash

Looks like that Carnival Squash, no? This whitish-yellow and green squash is small and compact. It's the perfect sized bowl for an individual serving! It's flesh has flavor similar to a sweet potato and the skin is edible. Any recipe calling for sweet potato or pumpkin makes an excellent host for the sweet dumpling squash.



6



7

### Spaghetti Squash

Spaghetti squash is easy to find and identify, and is quite popular. Cut one open and you'll understand just how this variety got its name! By scraping the flesh you will get "strings" that closely resemble noodles. Try swapping out pasta for spaghetti squash for a healthy alternative!



8

### Blue Hubbard Squash

Most blue Hubbard squash are large and lumpy. You are most likely to find them in the store as pre-cut wedges, but keep an eye out for them at your local market! The variety pictured here, the Blue Ballet, is smaller and smoother, making it easier to prepare at home. This variety has a sweet-tasting orange flesh! Try topping it with brown sugar or maple syrup and a pat of butter.

### Delicata Squash

Also known as the sweet potato squash, it is characterized by its pale yellow shading and resembles its summer squash cousins. It is more susceptible to bruises and decay, but if stored properly or eaten fresh it is easy to prepare as its thin skin is edible. When cooked, the flesh of this squash is similar to a sweet potato, hence the name, but the flavor is a bit more earthy.



9



10

### Red Kuri Squash

This squash is also known as Orange Hokkaido, red Hubbard or potimarron. Like all Hubbard squashes, it is asymmetrical and lopsided. It has a yellow flesh with a smooth, chestnut flavor. Full-flavored and sweet, red kuri is delicious with butter and herbs and is often an ingredient in soups, stews and casseroles.

### Buttercup Squash

This squash is characterized by its compact shape and pale green stripes running vertically from top to bottom. It looks similar to a kabocha squash, but its distinctive bottom features a circular ridge, unlike the kabocha. This ridge may surround a pronounced bump on the base of the squash. The scent of a buttercup squash may resemble a cucumber, but upon baking, the flesh becomes dense and mild. Try serving this cut up like sweet potatoes!



11



12

### Acorn Squash

This squash has an acorn-like shape, giving it its name. Choose an acorn squash with a dull green rind to avoid over ripe flesh that is tough and fibrous. It is an ideal shape for stuffing due to its bowl-like center. Expect a sunny-colored flesh with a sweet, nutty flavor.



For more great recipes for these specific squash varieties, check out our resource at [Epicurious.com](http://Epicurious.com)! Thank you to Epicurious for the photos and facts on these popular winter squash varieties.

### Select and Store

Winter squash is prone to decay, so inspect your chosen squash carefully before purchase. Squash should be firm, heavy for their size, and the rinds should be dull rather than glossy. Choose a squash with a hard rind to ensure your squash is not watery or lacking flavor.

Winter squash has a *much* longer storage life than summer squash. Depending on the variety, it can be easily kept fresh for between one and six months. Keep your squash away from direct light and do not keep it in the extreme heat or cold. Ideal storage temperature range is between 50-60 degrees F. If you wish to cut or cube your squash, cover the pieces in plastic wrap and store them in the refrigerator for 1-2 days. Freeze squash by first cutting it into pieces that are the ideal size for individual recipes. This will help you avoid waste!

### Tips for Preparing Winter Squash

Rinse your squash under cold water before cutting. If you wish to steam your squash, all varieties require peeling except Kabocha and butternut squash. It is easily peeled with a knife or a potato peeler.

Butternut squash's unique shape makes cutting into cubes for steaming more difficult. It is easiest to first cut it in half between the neck and the bulb. Then you can peel it much easier. Cut the bulb in half and remove the seeds before slicing into 1-inch cubes. This is the best size for steaming! You typically will only need to steam for 7 minutes.

If you are baking your squash, there is no need to peel it! Cut the ends off, cut the squash in half lengthwise down the middle and scoop out the seeds and bake. You could also leave your squash whole, but remember to pierce the rind a few times with a fork or paring knife. Bake and scoop out the seeds after it has been cooked.

Don't forget to save the seeds! Seeds from winter squash can make a great snack food and can be prepared the same way as pumpkin seeds. Once scooped out from the squash and separated from the pulp, you can place the seeds in a single layer on a cookie sheet and lightly roast them at 160-170 degrees F for 15-20 minutes.

**Find your producer of fresh, locally grown winter squash varieties by searching our comprehensive, online [Minnesota Grown Directory](#)!**

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