

Squash Essentials

By Sharon Tabor Warren



While turning foliage provides a vibrant tapestry as we segue into autumn, winter squash can lend culinary colors at mealtime. In most parts of the country, the days have a crisp edge while nights are cooler and longer. After hectic summer months when activities and many hours of sunlight keep us on the run, we change our routines to fit the season.

Years ago, winter squash were seen in the stores only from fall to early spring. Today, as we import foods from around the world, the squash are available year-round. I still refer to varieties of squash as winter or summer, but newer terms divide the two types into soft- and hard-shelled.

Squash are indigenous to the Western hemisphere and have been a staple for Native Americans for more than 5,000 years. After the introduction of the vegetable to the original European settlers, they also considered it a valuable staple. Both Washington and Jefferson were enthusiastic about squash, and kitchen gardens at both Mt. Vernon and Monticello included different varieties.

The winter squash varieties include the ubiquitous pumpkin and are actually gourds—fleshy vegetables protected by rinds—that grow on vines. Acorn and butternut, the two most common types of winter squash, don't really beckon to

us from the marketplace because they are not particularly eye-catching.

The acorn squash, mostly dark green but sometimes with a bit of orange or gold, has vertical furrows from stem to tip and is shaped like the nut from which it takes its name. It has a hard-shelled skin and should be solid when purchased. The meat of the acorn squash is golden yellow, mild and sweet.

Butternut squash is even less imposing with its neutral tan color, smooth skin and bell shape. It's usually about a foot long, but don't let the size scare you. The flesh of the butternut is deep orange in color and very rich.

On several occasions, standing in a checkout line with one or the other of these two vegetables in my basket, I've been asked, "What is that?" Checkout clerks know what it is because they have to select it from a list to calculate price, but more than one has inquired, "What do you do with it?"

If you aren't already a squash aficionado, you're missing out because it's nutritious, versatile and easy to prepare. If you've previously joined the ranks of squash lovers, you'll find

some new twists on old favorites in the recipes.

Select squash that's heavy for its size. The shells should have deep color with smooth skin, no cracks or soft spots. Choose a size that will provide you with the number of servings desired. For instance, a small baked acorn squash that is 6 inches in diameter will provide four servings. Always scrub the vegetables well before use.

Winter squash is usually baked, roasted, steamed or simmered unpeeled. The most basic method of preparation (No-Fuss Baked Squash) will cook in a 375-degree oven in about 45 minutes or in a microwave in 10 minutes.

Although some recipes suggest peeled squash, I recommend cooking without removing the rind, if possible, because the squash is very firm and cutting is difficult. It requires a heavy, sharp knife, preferably serrated, and it's best to place the squash on a towel to reduce the possibility of slipping. The best method is to have someone hold it steady on the towel while you carve.

Nutritionally, squash varies by variety. Generally, 3 1/2 ounces of baked squash contains about 63 calories, 15 grams carbohydrate, 2 grams each fiber and protein, and 82 percent of the recommended daily allowance for vitamin A and 31 percent for vitamin C. Squash is also lauded as an inflammation reduction agent in the practice of ancient Chinese medicine.

Recipes for winter squash are plentiful. I've included my favorites that give a variety of possibilities from soup to bread to casserole.

NO-FUSS BAKED SQUASH

Some folks like to add butter, salt, pepper or even cinnamon to their servings of baked squash.

1 acorn or butternut squash, halved and seeded

Spray margarine (optional)
Hot water

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Spray cut sides of squash with margarine. Place in shallow baking dish cut side down. (You may halve butternut squash again crosswise to fit in baking dish more easily.) Add 1/4 inch hot water to baking dish. Cover with waxed paper. Bake for 45 minutes, or until squash pierces easily with the tines of a fork. Serve immediately. Serves 4 to 6.

Variation: To cook in microwave, follow directions, placing the squash in a microwave-safe dish. Cook on high for 10 minutes, or until done.

ACORN & APPLE SOUP

1 large acorn squash, halved and seeded
1 (15 1/2-ounce) can sweet potatoes, mashed with liquid
1 cup chicken broth
2 cups apple juice or apple cider
1 cup 1/2-inch-cubed pared Granny Smith apples
1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme or 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg or more to taste
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1 cup heavy cream, light cream, half-and-half or fat-free half-and-half
1/2 cup dry sherry

Bake or steam acorn squash. Cool until easily handled. Peel. Purée pulp in blender. (You should have about 1 1/2 cups.)

In large pot, combine puréed squash, sweet potatoes, chicken broth, apple juice, apples, thyme, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Simmer for 20 to 30

minutes, or until apples are thoroughly cooked. Add heavy cream and dry sherry. Heat through.

Garnish individual servings with a dollop of heavy cream and/or a small sprig of fresh thyme, if desired. Serves 6 to 8.

VEGETARIAN STUFFED SQUASH

- 1 acorn or butternut squash, halved and seeded
- 2 cups cooked wild rice
- 1/2 cup diced canned mushrooms, drained (reserve liquid)
- 1/2 cup minced onions
- 1/4 cup finely chopped pecans or walnuts
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- Paprika (optional)
- Fresh thyme leaves (optional)

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place squash halves in baking dish cut side up.

In bowl, combine wild rice, mushrooms, onions, pecans, salt and pepper. Moisten as needed with reserved liquid. Evenly spoon into squash cavities.

Bake for 45 minutes, or until squash pierces easily with the tines of a fork. Sprinkle paprika to taste and thyme leaves to taste over top. Serves 2.

HERB-BAKED BUTTERNUT SQUASH

- 1 butternut squash, halved and seeded
- Softened butter
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons dry sherry
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- Paprika

September/October 2004

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place squash in baking dish cut side up. Rub insides of squash halves with butter to taste. Evenly sprinkle on salt, dry sherry, brown sugar and thyme. Sprinkle on a little paprika for color. Bake for 45 minutes, or until squash pierces easily with the tines of a fork. Serves 4 to 6.

Variation: To cook in microwave, follow directions, placing the squash in a microwave-safe dish. Cook on high for 10 minutes, or until done.

WINTER SQUASH CASSEROLE

Casserole

- 2 acorn or butternut squash, halved and seeded
- Hot water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup margarine, melted
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 teaspoon dry sherry
- 1/3 cup milk

Topping

- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup flour
- 2 tablespoons margarine, melted
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. For casserole, place squash halves in baking dish cut side down. (You may halve butternut squash again crosswise to fit in baking dish more easily.) Add 1/4 inch hot water to baking dish. Cover with waxed paper. Bake for 45 minutes, or until squash pierces easily with the tines of a fork. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees.

Scoop pulp from shells, or let cool and peel. Cube squash into large bowl; mash. (You should have 3 cups mashed squash.)

To squash, add sugar, margarine,

www.HomeCookingMagazine.com 27

eggs, dry sherry and milk. Turn into casserole dish.

For topping, combine brown sugar, flour, margarine and pecans. Sprinkle over casserole. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until done. Serves 6 to 8.

WINTER SQUASH NUT BREAD

1 to 2 acorn or butternut squash,
halved and seeded

Hot water

1 cup oil or shortening

2/3 cup water

3 1/3 cups flour

3 cups sugar

1 1/2 teaspoons salt

2 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1 teaspoon nutmeg

1/2 teaspoon ground cloves

1 cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Place squash halves in baking dish cut side down. (You may halve butternut squash again crosswise to fit in baking dish more easily.) Add 1/4 inch hot water to baking dish. Cover with waxed paper. Bake for 45 minutes, or until squash pierces easily with the tines of a fork. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees.

Scoop pulp from shells, or let cool and peel. Cube squash into large bowl; mash. (You should have 2 cups mashed squash.) To squash, add oil and 2/3 cup water.

In large bowl, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and walnuts. Add wet ingredients. Blend together. (Do not beat.)

Pour batter into 2 large nonstick loaf pans or 4 small nonstick loaf pans. Bake for 1 hour, or until done. Cool

in pans for 10 to 20 minutes before removing. Serve with softened cream cheese or butter, if desired. Makes 2 large loaves.

Note: This bread freezes well.