



Urban Harvest

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Squash for Your Summer Vegetable Garden

Bob Randall

Although the Houston summer is surely the worst weather we face each year, there are also some pluses. We go tropical with sweet fragrant gingers gracing the evenings, garden ripe peaches on the morning cereal, and cantaloupes and figs at lunch or dinner. If planted in May or even later, there are several kinds of squashes that grow easily and well here and of course many that don't. Here are several that can be grown with success.

The squash family Cucurbitaceae is a large botanical family of plants that includes the common squashes, melons, and cucumbers we see in the supermarkets, as well as many that are lesser known at least among long term residents here. Some of these are lesser known because they are adapted to tropical conditions and therefore won't grow in United States outside of Houston, Florida, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico so are rare in our markets.

But they also have not had the best of PR agents and cultural translators. Although there is no botanical distinction between a squash, a gourd, a pumpkin, and a melon there is a major distinction in English. Squashes are thought of as "vegetables", pumpkins as pie fillings and jack-o-lanterns, gourds as decorative bowls and rattles, and melons as dessert fruit. So most of us would not suspect that fuzzy gourds, calabash gourds, luffa gourds, winter melons, bitter melons, and tropical pumpkins all are mainly used as squash vegetables in hot meals. So for clarity, it is best to call all of these squash whenever possible.

Calabasa or Tropical Pumpkin Squash

What we call in Houston Calabasa is a tan skinned delicious and nutritious squash native to the hot humid coasts of Florida and the Caribbean. It is most like the butternut squashes found in the supermarket. Calabasa is either pumpkin shaped or pear shaped.

Calabasa is identified there as Seminole, but is also similar to what they call Texas Indian Moschata and Tahitian. What has been called Tahitian by seed companies, however, is an even more delicious, deep orange fleshed, very long necked "trombone-shaped" squash that corresponds in the botanical gardens' pictures to what they call neck pumpkin, zucchetto rambicante and tromboncino. This squash is among the best tasting of them all.

All of these squashes spread out in all directions putting down roots wherever they find damp soil. They also—if you let them—grow up and over fences, bushes, grape arbors and trees so quickly and so far that I have jokingly warned gardeners to keep pets and small children away to avoid losing them in the jungle. This trait allows calabasa to avoid the fate of so many other squashes. Squash vine borers attack all squashes in the American squash genus *Curcubita* and usually kill them

quickly. But calabasa usually defeats the borer with its thick stems, multiple rootings, and ability to grow in even the hottest weather.

Other American Squashes

Tromboncino by contrast stops growing at temperatures over 92°. So it often succumbs to borers in the inner city parts of the area where the heat island drives the temperatures into the high nineties. Another squash that resists borers is tatume. In my opinion, it is not as tasty as tromboncino and calabasa, but it is even more borer resistant. Tatume is an acorn squash relative from Mexico.

Other Squashes

There are many other squashes you can grow. Some of them such as the various cushaws may be old family favorites. Others like the bitter melon squashes of Asia, the snake gourd squashes of Laos, and the winter melon squashes and fuzzy gourd squashes of China are tastes acquired by non-natives only with effort. They are however very easy to grow on trellises in hot weather.

There are on the other hand, two types of tropical squashes that make excellent summer squash substitutes, but have no insect or disease problems. There are many varieties of the tropical white squash *Lagenaria siceraria*. This squash is known in Europe as zucca or cucuzzi; in English speaking Africa as calabash gourd, in the US as birdhouse gourd or bushel gourd, and in China as opo. There are many other names around the world for different shapes, of what is basically a bland-tasting tender squash if picked a few inches long. If allowed to mature, like a summer squash it becomes hard-shelled and therefore useful only for bowls and rattles.

One last "squash" worth considering is the angled luffa or Chinese okra. This first cousin of the sponge gourd used to make bath sponges, needs a tall trellis (like a fig tree) to grow on. As with the zuccas above, these plants are carefree and highly productive. Some people think angled luffas when small are the best tasting of all summer squashes. Some of these seeds are available from Urban Harvest (call us for the latest inventory), while the *Lagenaria* and luffa are available from Evergreen Seeds. Tatume is available from Seeds West Garden and several other internet sources. Tromboncino (*Zucchetta rampicante*) is available from Territorial Seeds and several other internet sites. Once you have grown these, you can easily save seeds and eat fine squashes for decades to come.

You can sprout seeds in damp paper towels; start them in pots, or plant directly in the center of a raised bed or below a trellis. Once the plants are growing, put high quality mulch a few inches thick at their base. This will keep the soil damp where the feeder roots are, keep down competing weeds, keep squashes from rotting on damp soil, and make it easier from vine rooting varieties to develop multiple roots. With a small effort, you can easily grow a tremendous variety of long keeping, nutritious and tasty squash.

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