

## Winter Squash



**What is winter squash?** Actually, a summer-growing annual this harvest product represents several squash species (spaghetti, acorn, butternut, buttercup, and pumpkin). It differs from summer squash in that it is harvested and eaten in the mature fruit stage, when the seeds within have matured fully and the skin has hardened into a tough rind. At this stage, most varieties can be stored for use during the winter, hence the name.

**Selection:** To find the best winter squash, look for a hard, tough rind with an attached stem. As well, choose one that is heavy for its size, meaning that there should be a thick wall and plenty of edible flesh. Avoid those with cuts, punctures, and sunken or moldy spots on the rind. A tender rind indicates that the squash is not yet ripe (and then won't be as flavorful).

**Storage:** Winter squash keeps well, up to 3 months if stored in a cool, dry place. They store best with part of the stem still attached (to help retain moisture). Once raw squash has been cut, store the squash wrapped in plastic in the refrigerator for 4 to 5 days. For cooked squash, store in the refrigerator in an airtight container for up to 5 days. If you decide to freeze your squash, do note that frozen cooked squash can stay fresh for up to 1 year.

**Nutrients/nutrition:** 1 cup of cooked winter squash is one serving...this food choice is a powerhouse of anti-oxidants...vitamin A/beta-carotene with its 539 micrograms (~60% of the daily value) of vitamin A, 19 milligrams (~26% of daily value) of vitamin C; it promotes gut integrity with its 5 grams of fiber (23% of the daily value) and is cardio-protective with 14% of the daily value of potassium (494 milligrams).

**Preparation:** For all winter squash, wash and pat dry to remove dirt. Possible ways to prepare include, but are not limited to: Baking—this method brings out the sweetness of winter squash, saves beta-carotene content and is super easy. Halve small squash length-wise and scoop out seeds and strings. If your squash is larger, you might consider cutting into serving size portions. Remember to line baking sheet with aluminum foil so that the sugary juices stay here and not on the baking sheet itself. Pour about ¼ inch of water in the pan/sheet; cover with foil and bake at 350 until the squash is tender (for halves, ~40 minutes; for pieces, ~15 to 25 depending on the size). Sautéing—remove the rind using a paring knife and the grate, cube or dice the squash. Sauté in a mix of broth and oil until desired tenderness (~8 to 15 minutes). Steamed—Fill the bottom of the steamer with 2 inches of water. While steam is building up in steamer, peel and cut squash into 1-inch cubes. Steam **covered** for 7 minutes. Squash is done when it is tender, yet still firm enough to hold its shape. Transfer to a bowl. For more flavor toss squash with the oil, orange juice, salt, and pepper while it is still hot. Research shows that carotenoids in foods are best absorbed when consumed with oils. Season with cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, cardamom, ginger, or turmeric.

***Eat well to be well!***