

## Winter Squash: More than just decoration

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This time of year, it's common to see squashes laid out in decorative heaps---dark green acorn squash, cream colored butternut, or red/orange pumpkins mixed with dark green striped Hubbards. In addition to making a beautiful display, they are a tasty source of many helpful nutrients, but many people don't know how to cook them.

Squashes were first cultivated from wild varieties found in an area between Guatemala and Mexico; evidence shows that they have been eaten by humans for >10,000 years. The original squashes were grown primarily for their seeds, but over the years, varieties with milder, tasty flesh developed. Explorers took squash back to Europe, where they spread rapidly, even into Asia.

1 cup of baked cubes of winter squash provide 145% of the daily value of Vitamin A, 35% of Vitamin C, 25% of potassium and 25% of fiber. They are also a good source of manganese, folate and B vitamins, all with just 79 calories per cup!

Research has shown that extracts of squash helped to decrease enlarged prostates in older men (BPH), as well as prevent cell mutation, thus decreasing cancer risk. Winter squashes contain beta cryptoxanthin, which decreases lung cancer risk. (This compound is also found in corn, papaya, red bell pepper, oranges and peaches). In an overall population, those with the highest consumption of this compound had a 27% decrease in their risk of lung cancer, but among smokers, there was a 37% decreased risk compared to smokers with the lowest intake of this nutrient. Please note that this study involved eating real food; followup studies did not show the same result for taking this compound in supplement form.

The carotenoids found in winter squash are primarily in the form of beta carotene; it is this compound that helps prevent oxidation of cholesterol. Only oxidized cholesterol builds up in vessels and causes problems. Also, beta carotene and other carotenoids help to regulate blood sugar in those with insulin resistance and diabetes. Carotenoids also have antiinflammatory properties, which help to improve asthma, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. The high folate content of squashes also help to decrease levels of homocystine in the blood; elevated levels of homocystine increase the risk of blood clots (think heart attack and strokes) as well as osteoporosis.

For those of you not familiar with the different types of squash, good depictions can be found at <http://www.foodsubs.com/Squash.html> and at <http://whatscookingamerica.net/squash.htm>. Most winter squashes can be used interchangeably, so feel free to use whatever is handy. Since most have hard rinds that are difficult to cut, options are to either bake them whole (first add some knife slashes through the rind near the stem to allow steam to escape), and then scoop out the strings and seeds, or treat them as you would a pumpkin---cut a portion off the top, then scoop out the seeds prior to baking. Some grocers will also sell them already cut; obviously, these pieces cannot be stored as long as uncut squashes and should be used right away.

An unusual but very quick recipe for winter squash follows---I've served it to veggie haters and they were surprised at how good it was!

#### **Steamed Winter Squash with Red Chili Sauce**

1 medium butternut squash, peeled and cut into 1 inch cubes (~4 cups)  
1 medium onion, peeled, cut in half and then into thin strips  
3-4 cloves of garlic, peeled  
1 tsp chili powder

1/8 tsp cumin  
1/8 tsp cinnamon  
~1 cup vegetable or chicken stock  
Fresh cilantro, parsley or basil to taste

Place the cubed squash into a steamer and cook until nearly done but still slightly firm inside, ~5-6 minutes. While squash is cooking, place several tablespoons of stock into skillet and “saute” onion until soft, stirring often. Add garlic and spices; after ~ 1 minute, add remainder of stock and simmer gently. When squash is steamed, add to sauce and cook another few minutes until fully done. Sprinkle with fresh herbs and serve.