



## **ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE**

### **The Garden Spot For week of June 8, 2009**

#### **Yes, Zucchini Really IS a Squash!**

Among the first summer vegetables maturing in home gardens is the Summer Squash. If your garden's squash is not ready yet, it will probably only be a matter of days until you'll be enjoying it.

Squash is a gourd fruit. Its cousins include cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and gourds. They are of American origin. Native Americans grew many varieties of squash. Even squash blossoms are edible.

Most popular among squashes today is the crookneck, straightneck, and zucchini. Zucchini actually came to America from Italy where the name is a derivative of an Italian word meaning "sweetest".

Summer squash love warm weather and grows on nonvining bushes. Any well-drained soil produces excellent yields of summer squash. Squash plants are shallow-rooted and require ample soil moisture at all stages of growth.

Squash plants bear male and female flowers on the same plant. Male flowers are formed first, then female flowers. Female flowers are characterized by an undeveloped fruit at the base. Pollen will be transferred from male to female flowers by bees. Be cautious about using insecticides around squash plants as it could kill the bees.

Harvest squash when small and tender. Squash will mature quickly: five days or less from bloom to maturity. Pick most elongated varieties when less

than 2 inches in diameter or 6 to 8 inches long. Do not allow summer squash to get hard, large, and seedy. Squash will bruise easily, so handle them with care.

Insects and diseases can affect squash. Spotted and striped cucumber beetles attack seedlings soon after emergence. Squash bugs can be a problem on older plants.

One common frustration that growers encounter when growing squash is that sometimes squash plants wilt and die about the time they start producing. This is probably caused by the squash vine borer. Look for white, grub-like larvae within the stem of the plant (by cutting it open). The larvae hatch from the eggs and travel down the plant to the stem and literally 'core it out". To prevent this, begin controlling it by applying an insecticide to the base of the plant. Once grubs are inside the stem, it is almost impossible to control.

### **Enjoying your Squash.**

Squash is a versatile vegetable that is low in calories and high in Vitamin A and potassium. It is eaten raw or cooked, plain or in casseroles.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System and United States Department of Agriculture do not recommend home canning of summer squash. It should be frozen. To freeze, wash squash well and cut into ½-inch slices. Blanch squash 3 minutes; cool and drain. Pack squash into containers, leaving a ½-inch headspace.

Many people like to freeze their squash so it can be fried later. To do this, wash the squash and cut off the blossom and stem ends. Then blanch the squash WHOLE in boiling water for 4-5 minutes (depending on the size of the squash). After cooling, slice into frying size pieces. Coat the squash in your favorite batter or mixture. Place squash slices on a cookie sheet and place in a freezer. Leave them in the freezer for at least an hour until they are quick-frozen. IMMEDIATELY transfer to a freezer-safe container, seal and freeze. They can be removed from the freezer container and fried without thawing.

For assistance with food preservation questions of any type, contact the Limestone County Extension Office at 232-5510.

For growing questions, the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a 'HelpLine' on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m., also at the Limestone County

Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens. They can be reached through the Extension number at 232-5510.

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