



Harvesting and Storing Pumpkin and Winter Squash

Learn how best to harvest pumpkins and other squash in order to process and preserve them for eating.

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Photo credit: Andrea Woodhall, Armstrong County Master Gardener

Look at all those beautiful pumpkins sitting out there in your pumpkin patch! Congratulations on guiding them through hail and drought and fungus and bugs and diseases and pestilence to an abundant crop just waiting for harvest! Now you need to know about proper harvesting and storing techniques.

The ideal scenario is to let them completely ripen on the vine and harden off in

the field. When ripe, pumpkins and winter squash turn the appropriate colors for their variety, uniformly across the entire fruit. For most pumpkins that will be a vivid orange. While ripe pumpkins will have hard, shiny shells that can't be punctured easily with your fingernail, the shells of other winter squash will lose the glossiness of youth as their rinds become harder and more durable. Vines start to dry and wither from maturity (not disease) and slowly die back exposing the beautiful abundance hiding beneath their leaves. At this point, stems can be cut with a knife or cutters, leaving 3 or 4 inches of precious "handle" attached to the pumpkin but

just a one-inch stub for other winter squash. This “handle” should never be used to lift or carry the fruit because it can be easily broken off. This would not only ruin the aesthetics of the pumpkin but would also create an entrance for bacteria and disease, encouraging rot and other premature spoilage. Handle the fruits a bit delicately because marks, bruises or punctures to the skin will shorten precious storage time.

Harden off the squash for about seven to fourteen days by letting them sit in the field if conditions are favorable. You can also lift the fruit off the ground and place in single layers in a dry, well-ventilated spot. Ideally, hardening off conditions boast temperatures of 80° to 85°F with 80 to 85% relative humidity. Once cured, your unmarked and intact squash can then be put into long term storage in a cool, well-ventilated area with temperatures from 50 to 60°F and relative humidity from 50 to 75% (this prevents shriveling). Resources say storage time is two or three months for most squash, with acorn being shorter (five to eight weeks), and Hubbard being longer (five to six months). Temperatures should not be allowed to drop below 50 °F. Exposure to temperatures lower than that can cause chilling injury. Those fruits should be used immediately because storage is predictably unreliable. I’ve had pumpkins resting on a cool, dry kitchen counter for up to a year after picking them up at the farmer’s market. An important key to successful storage is frequent and proper inspection. If a spot appears on the rind, it is time to carve out that spot and bake or otherwise process the pumpkin.

Unripe pumpkins can continue to ripen off the vine provided they have started to turn orange. If you are impatient and must have that pumpkin sitting on the porch now—or if the perfectly shaped pumpkin at the farmer’s market still has some green on it—go ahead and harvest! Also, if disease or pests are damaging the vines, or there is a threat of a hard freeze, it’s time to bring those pumpkins in. Pumpkins can survive a light frost that will damage vines, but a hard freeze (<28°F) will weaken the rind and give bacteria an entry which can shorten storage time significantly. The semi-ripened fruits should be cut off the vines and set to cure in a well-ventilated space with temperatures from 80° to 85°F and relative humidity between 80 and 85%. Semi-ripened fruits do not store well.

As with everything, there are always exceptions to the rule. For instance, the need for curing of squash is somewhat debatable. In fact, curing acorn squash can actually be detrimental since the skins are thinner and more delicate and storage time is already the shortest of all the squashes.

Do not attempt to store fruit that has been bruised or punctured as that is a recipe for failure. They should be processed immediately. I prefer to bake my fruit, mash or puree its pulp, portion into freezer bags, label and pop in the freezer. (Spaghetti squash does not need to be mashed!) There are no research-based recipes for home-canning pureed pumpkin (or other winter squash), nor are there safe recipes for home-canned pumpkin butter. You can, however, process *cubed* pumpkin and other winter squash, but only in a pressure canner following a research-based recipe and process. Drying pumpkin by making vegetable leather with added honey and spices can be another fun option. And don't forget about the seeds. Roasted seeds are both healthy and tasty. (For more detailed information on preserving, see [Let's Preserve Squash and Pumpkins](#) .)

Pumpkins used to decorate for Halloween and Thanksgiving can be recycled. As long as only non-toxic paints and decorations have been used and its shell is still intact, the pumpkin can be processed and eaten just like one straight from the field. If you traditionally share your harvest, don't forget those bakers that need pumpkins for Thanksgiving and Christmas pies and goodies. Pumpkin and squash can be used in everything from appetizers to desserts, and recipes are easily found. They can also be used in cosmetic products and spa salves and balms. Properly handled and stored, your pumpkin harvest can be enjoyed for many long months in a multitude of delightful ways.