About – Hard or winter squash comes in a variety of shapes—round and elongated, scalloped and pear-shaped with flesh that ranges from golden-yellow to deep orange. Most hard squashes are vine-type plants whose fruits are harvested when fully mature. They take longer to mature than summer squash (3 months or more) and are best harvested once the cool weather of fall sets in. Winter squash have hard, thick skins.

Varieties
Acorn: As its name suggests it is shaped like an acorn, its distinct ribs run the length of its hard, blackish-green or golden-yellow skin. A favorite baking squash, it’s easy to slice into halves. A small acorn squash weighs from 1 to 3 pounds, and has sweet, slightly fibrous flesh.

Banana: In shape and skin color, this winter squash is reminiscent of a banana. It grows up to two feet in length and about six inches in diameter. Its bright orange, finely-textured flesh is sweet. Banana squash is often cut up into smaller pieces, then baked until tender. Or, wrap it in plastic wrap and microwave on high for 10 to 12 minutes. Once cooked, use a fork to rake out the “spaghetti-like” stringy flesh, and serve. After cutting, wrap it tightly and refrigerate up to two days. Spaghetti squash also freezes well.

Butternut: Beige colored and shaped like a vase, it has a bulbous end and pale, creamy skin with a fine-textured, deep-orange flesh. With a sweet, nutty flavor this squash tastes somewhat similar to sweet potatoes. The more orange the color, the riper, drier and sweeter the squash will be.

Buttercup: Buttercup Squash are part of the Turban squash family (hard shells with turban-like shapes) and are a popular variety of winter squash. Buttercup squash has a creamy, orange flesh and is much sweeter than other winter varieties.

Carnival: Carnival Squash are a population of winter squash. They come in a variety of colors including orange, green, and yellow. They are medium-sized, with a soft, orange flesh that is sweet and mildly spiced.

Delicata: An heirloom variety, it is also called Sweet Potato, Peanut squash, and Bohemian squash. This is one of the tastier winter squashes, with creamy pulp that tastes a bit like sweet potatoes. Size may range from 5 to 10 inches in length. Its thin, tender skin is also edible.

Gold Nugget: Sometimes referred to as an Oriental pumpkin because of its shape and color, it ranges in size from one to three pounds. Both the skin and the flesh are orange.

Hubbard: The extra-hard skins make them one of the best keeping winter squashes. They are very large and irregularly shaped, with a blue-gray skin that is quite “warted” and irregular. Hubbard squash is often sold in pieces because it can grow to unwieldy sizes. The yellow flesh tends to be very moist and requires longer cooking times.

Kabocha: Kabocha is the generic Japanese word for squash, but refers most commonly to a squash of the buttercup type. It has a rich sweet flavor, and often dry and flaky when cooked. Use in any dish in which buttercup squash would work.

Spaghetti: A small, watermelon-shaped variety, ranges in size from 2 to 5 pounds or more. It has a golden-yellow oval rind and a mild, nutty flavor. When cooked, the flesh separates in strands that resemble spaghetti pasta. The yellowest Spaghetti squash will be the ripest and best to eat. Those that are nearly white are not very ripe.

Sweet Dumpling: This small, mildly sweet-tasting squash resembles a miniature pumpkin with its top pushed in. Weighing only about 7 ounces, it has sweet and tender orange flesh and is a great size for stuffing and baking as individual servings.

Turban - Turban Squash has colors that vary from bright orange, to green or white. It has golden-yellow flesh and its taste is reminiscent to hazelnut. With extravagant coloration they make a popular harvest ornamental or centerpiece.

Selection – Choose firm, well-shaped squash that are heavy for their size and have a hard, tough skin. Do not choose those that have sunken or moldy spots. Avoid squash with cuts or punctures in the skin. Also, slight variations in skin color do not affect flavor. A tender rind indicates immaturity, which is a sign of poor quality in winter squash varieties.

Storage – Place squash on top of thick pads of newspapers in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location. Check on a regular basis for rot and use within one to three months. Hubbard squash and other dark-green-skinned squashes should not be stored near apples, as the ethylene from apples may cause the skin to turn orange-yellow.

Preparation and Uses – Winter squash matures on the vine and develops an inedible, thick, hard rind (except Delicata) and tough seeds. Because this rind makes most squash difficult to peel, it’s easier to cook the unpeeled squash, and then scoop out the cooked flesh. Wash the exterior of the squash just before using.

To bake a whole (1 to 1 1/2 pound) winter squash, pierce the rind with a fork and bake in a 350-degree oven 45 minutes. Test for doneness by piercing with a fork.

For microwaving, place halves or quarters, cut side down, in a shallow dish, add 1/4 cup water. Cover tightly and microwave on HIGH for 6 minutes per pound.

To prepare spaghetti squash, cut the gourd in half lengthwise and remove the seeds, then bake until tender. Or wrap it in plastic wrap and microwave on high for 10 to 12 minutes. Once cooked, use a fork to rake out the “spaghetti-like” stringy flesh, and serve. After cutting, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate up to 2 days. Spaghetti squash also freezes well.

All varieties are great for pureeing, roasting and baking. Once squash is cooked and mashed, it can be used in soups, main dishes, vegetable side dishes, even breads, muffins, custards and pies. Add peeled squash cubes to your favorite soups, stews, beans, grains and vegetable ragouts. Dress any cooked winter squash with butter and herbs, a cream sauce, cheese sauce, maple syrup and nuts, marinara sauce or stewed fruit.

Nutrition – Winter squash is an excellent source of vitamin A. It is also a very good source of vitamin C, potassium, dietary fiber, and manganese. In addition, winter squash is a good source of omega-3 fatty acids, thiamin, copper, vitamin B5, vitamin B6, niacin and copper.

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