

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Squash & Melons

BY BARBARA KOB SAR

Summer is the time to sing praises to the great cucurbit family. These viney annual plants, indigenous to the Americas, all produce large white or yellow flowers, which, when left on the plant to mature, grow into an amazing array of squashes, gourds, cucumbers, and melons.

Anyone with a zucchini vine in their yard knows that plucking off a few zucchini in the bud can mean there is something unusual to bring to the summer table. Lacking my own vines, I visit our farmers' markets to find fresh squash blossoms. I only take home limited quantities, since their shelf life is fleeting, on or off the squash plant.

Squash blossoms are harvested from any variety of small squash, but my shopping experiences usually turn up zucchini blossoms. It is the male blossoms that are used for cooking. All blossoms resemble one another except for size, but there's more than meets the eye.

Helen Krayenhoff, co-owner of Oakland-based Kassenhoff Growers, says that home gardeners visiting their stand at farmers' markets often ask the same question: Why do my baby squashes turn yellow, shrivel up and die? Krayenhoff explains that these are actually unpollinated fruit of the female flowers. For them to turn into mature squash they must be properly pollinated.

So what's a gardener to do? "Just schmush a male and female flower together," Krayenhoff says.

(Pick a male flower and gently rub the pollen from the center of the flower on the center of the female flower.) The males grow from a long stem (refer to illustration to identify.) Leave some on the plant so other pollinators can do their job, she says.

Natural pollination is available when the bees are buzzing. Joe Eaton, writer for the



San Francisco Chronicle, tells me about a squash bee. "It's a native solitary bee that specializes in squashes, gourds, and pumpkins," he says, "and is responsible for the pollination of most of the California crops of these plants."

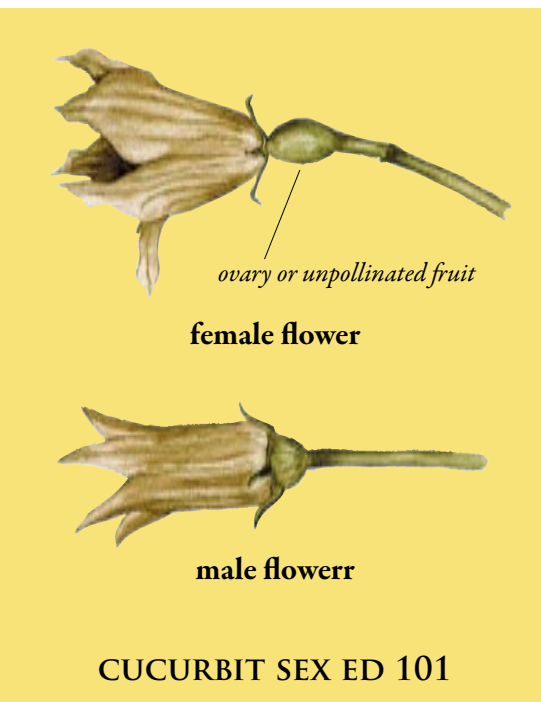
The squash bee originated in Mexico and followed the plants as cultivation spread north. Both sexes are medium-sized and hairy on body and legs; males have tan hair on thorax and abdomen, females are kind of tawny colored and robust. They're up bright and early to collect pollen before sunrise.

Once I carefully carry my squash blossoms home I'm ready to get down to business. Number one is to check inside for insects. Then cut off the green stems and strip away the stringy inner sepals (leave the base and stamen intact).

I love to accentuate the squash blossoms' delicate zucchini-like flavor in soups, quesadillas, risottos and salads. But I can't be stingy. The flavor is easily lost with too much garlic or onion added to the dish, so a simple sauté of minced scallions, sliced summer squash and corn with a big handful of sliced squash blossoms tossed in near the end of cooking is perfect. Delicious!

Summer squash is ubiquitous compared to squash blossoms. Well-meaning neighbors hand out bagfuls from their gardens—but that's a good thing. Unique shapes and sizes make summer squash appealing and exceptionally versatile in the kitchen. Mild flavors of summer squash benefit from the company of a grill or in combination with other warm-weather crops like peppers, tomatoes, corn, basil, and dill.

Summer squash are picked before reaching full maturity—usually two to seven days after flowering. At this point they offer up the thin skin, soft seeds, and high moisture content I'm looking for.



Slender, green zucchini (aka Italian squash or courgette) is the most prolific and best-known of the summer squash family. During peak season I lean toward buying the deep yellow colored golden zucchini, English squash (a paler, thicker version of the Italian variety) and the dark green, top-shaped scallopini (a cross between a zucchini and a scallop squash).

Scallop squash are an interesting group of white, light green, dark green, or sunny yellow disks with scalloped edges. Crook-neck squash also stand out in the crowd, with their bulbous blossom end that narrows at the neck.

Summer squash varieties with nonedible skin, such as opo and chayote, offer a refreshing flavor blend of squash and cucumber. They do well in a quick stir-fry with other summer vegetables and chicken.

MELONS

Melons show up at market just in time to offer a refreshing bite for summer meals. Muskmelons are the first to arrive, followed by the parade of watermelons.

Muskmelons are divided into two major groups: those with netted skin, like cantaloupe, Persian, and Galia, and those with smooth skins, including Crenshaw and honeydew. All are similar in structure, with a hollow cavity that contains all the seeds. If you can hear those seeds rattling around when you give it a gentle shake, the melon is more than likely past its prime.

Telltale signs of ripeness to look for when choosing a netted muskmelon are a tan- or gold-colored skin under prominent net-

ting, and a slight give to pressure at the blossom end. Ripe smooth-skinned muskmelons are velvety and slightly sticky to the touch.

Watermelons are the other broad category of melons. Choices include those with or without seeds, shapes from round to oblong, and flesh colors of red, pink, or yellow. Whew!

I've found the only foolproof way of finding the perfect specimen with the desirable deep color and dense flesh is to buy one already cut. But I prefer to cut my own, so I look for whole, ripe watermelons with a hard skin and a dull finish. The patch that develops during growing, where the melon is in contact with the ground, should turn from tan to a richer yellow color. If slapping the melon makes me feel better, I listen for a dull thump as a sign of ripeness. A sweet fragrance is always a must!

Once they're ripe, I pop melons into a plastic bag to store in the refrigerator. They give off ethylene gas, which may spoil other nearby produce.

I find melons best when simply served—chilled of course. A squeeze of lemon or lime or a sprinkle of salt and pepper is nice for a change. When I'm feeling more adventuresome, melons make up into lovely marmalades, salads, and soups.

Enjoy, and see you at the farmers' markets. ♣



SUMMER CROPS

Almonds
Apples
Beans
Blueberries
Cilantro
Corn
Cucumbers
Eggplant
Grapes
Melons
Nectarines
Peaches
Pears
Peas
Peppers
Plums
Pluots
Pomegranates
Raspberries
Squash
Strawberries
Tomatoes
Walnuts