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Contact: Denise Sullivan
Nutrition & Health Education Specialist
MU Extension-Jackson County
816-482-5850
sullivanand@missouri.edu

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Plants on Your Plate

Butternut Squash

While the onset of fall typically makes people think of pumpkins, the entire family of winter squash remind us of the change in seasons. This family of vegetables are uniquely beautiful with ribbed or bumpy skins, irregular shapes, and vibrant colors ranging from yellow to orange to dark green or even multi-toned. In comparison to their summertime cousins, winter squashes have a denser texture and richer flavor with firm flesh that holds up well in hearty soups, stews, casseroles, breads, and desserts.

Squash are members of the Cucurbitaceae family, commonly known as gourds, which makes them related to cucumbers, muskmelons and watermelons. Squash is one of the oldest known food crops, dating back at least 8,000 years. Archaeological remains have been found in ancient cliff dwellings in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Winter squash is known for its long keeping time, even several months, when kept in cool, dark environments.

One of the most popular winter squash varieties is the bulbous shaped butternut squash. The creamy off-white to tan skin contrasts sharply with the bright orange flesh, a clue to the high vitamin A content. Butternut squash is also rich in vitamin C, vitamin B6, protein, fiber, magnesium and potassium. While similar in flavor and texture as sweet potatoes, butternut squash has about half of the carbohydrate, so is a very popular choice among people managing

diabetes. As a rich source of potassium, it is also a smart choice for someone managing high blood pressure.

When selecting butternut squash, look for a firm, blemish free skin that feels heavy for its size. Avoid vegetables with wrinkled or soft spots. The rind should be very hard and difficult to pierce with your fingernail. With the hard rind, preparing this vegetable can be intimidating for those less familiar with this vegetable.

As with any vegetable, begin by washing under warm water, using a brush to remove dirt and debris. The squash can be simply cut in half lengthwise, the seeds scooped out and oven roasted, similar to spaghetti squash, with the pulp scooped after roasting. To have cubed squash, cut off the stem and blossom ends, and cut the squash in half, above where it rounds out. The two sections can now be easily peeled with a vegetable peeler, or if the intent is to stuff as part of the preparation, the rounded end can be left unpeeled. Each section can then be cut in half lengthwise, resulting in the solid 'neck' portion than can be cut into cubes, and the 'bowl' portion where the seeds are located. The seeds are then scooped out and can roasted like pumpkin seeds. At this point, the flesh can be cubed and either roasted, boiled or even eaten raw. I personally prefer roasting, as it brings out a richer, sweeter flavor that is suitable as a side dish on its own, pureed for baked goods like muffins, or in a soup like the recipe below.

Creamy Butternut Squash Soup

3 cups cubed butternut squash
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon butter
1 fresh rosemary sprig
½ cup chopped onion
3 cups apples, peeled and chopped
1 teaspoon grated ginger
1/2 cup apple cider
3 cups chicken stock
1/4 cup heavy cream

Preheat oven to 425. Toss squash with olive oil and spread in an even layer on a baking sheet. Roast the squash until tender, about 20 minutes. Meanwhile, melt the butter over medium-low heat in a large stockpot. Add the rosemary, onion, apple and fresh ginger and toss to coat with

the butter. Sauté onion and apple until softened but not browned, about 5 minutes. Add squash to pot and stir to combine. Add the apple cider and chicken broth and bring mixture to a boil. Turn down heat and simmer until vegetables are tender, 10-15 minutes, remove rosemary. Using an immersion blender, puree soup until you have reached a smooth but thick consistency. Add heavy cream and stir to blend and serve.

**If desired, clean stringy flesh from the seeds and roast to serve as a garnish to the soup.

Nutrition information: Calories: 247, Total Fat: 8.5g, Saturated Fat: 3g, Sodium: 132mg, Carbohydrates: 42g, Fiber: 6.5g, Protein: 5g

Recipe adapted from The Daily Meal, analyzed by verywellfit.com



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