

How to grow Squash, Melons and Cucumbers in the PNW

Cucumbers, squash and melons don't like cold weather. Care must be taken to keep them warm, especially at night.

To prepare your garden in spring before planting, work well-composted manure or compost into the first few inches of soil. At planting, broadcast (sprinkle evenly) a balanced vegetable fertilizer with a higher 2nd number (E.g. 8-10-8, 3-9-4, 4-6-3) according to package directions.

Warm the soil by placing black plastic sheeting on the ground where you will plant your peppers, ideally a couple weeks BEFORE you transplant them. When planting, cut two or three 6-inch crisscross holes at 15-20 inch intervals. After planting, poke large holes in with a pitchfork in the rest of the plastic to allow water to get to the soil. Place small piles of soil at edges to hold down plastic.

Next, "harden off" your plants for at least a week to acclimate them to the great outdoors. Start by placing them outdoors in a sheltered location with 2-3 hours of dappled sunlight, but bring them in at night. Increase their time outdoors, but bring them in at night.

Transplanting: Wait until the first week of June to transplant!

- Cucumbers and squash grow well in mounds. Add a shovel of sand and another of composted manure (available in bags at nurseries if you don't have access to it) or compost to the planting hole in that order.
- Don't disturb the roots! Lift the plant out of the pot carefully, and place in the prepared hole. Place the plant in the hole and backfill with soil so that the soil line is one inch higher up the stem than it was in the pot to allow more roots to form. Press the soil firmly around the plant and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets. Plant spacing is usually 15-20 inches apart.
- Give the vines some type of support
- Water and mulch regularly. Mulching helps the soil retain moisture, keeps down weeds, regulates soil temperature, and enriches the soil. 1-2 inches of grass clippings works well.

Create an artificial summer environment for your squash or cucumbers. Grow them under cover for the first couple weeks until the nights are above 65 degrees.

- Cover the transplants with DIY hot-caps—translucent gallon milk jugs with the bottoms cut off, no lid. You should cover them at night, and even during the day if it isn't sunny.
- Make a plastic "jacket" for your cuke or squash plants. Cover a tube made of 2 ft. wire fencing with plastic. It will be open at the top, but it will stay warm with the plastic jacket and the black plastic you placed on the soil when you transplanted.

Fertilizing: Cucumbers and Squash are medium to heavy feeders.

- One week after blossoming begins, sidedress with 1.5 oz of ammonium sulfate for each 10 ft of row, or nitrogen in the form of fish meal, blood meal, or a balanced fertilizer with a higher 1st number, E.g. 10-5-5 or 16-6-4). Read and follow the package instructions when applying the fertilizer you choose. Side dressing means to dig a 2-4 inch trench about 4 inches from the plant's stem, add recommended amount of fertilizer, and cover with soil.

Cucurbits are heavy feeders. Two weeks after this application, fertilize **every two weeks** with one of these methods:

- Side-dress them with composted manure or use a liquid fish emulsion
- Use a fertilizer that is lower in nitrogen than the other 2 numbers—E.g., The NPK number on the label should be something such as 1-2-2, 5-10-10 or 8-16-16. Follow directions on labels for amounts to use

Watering: Avoid overhead watering to prevent leaf fungus diseases. Irrigate to avoid water stress (drying out) and excessive wetness.

This growing guide is provided by the WSU Extension Master Gardeners of Cowlitz County.

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