Shonnard's
NURSERY FLORIST LANDSCAPE

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Growing Zucchini

Can you believe that up until the 20th Century, most Americans considered zucchini a special treat reserved for making special dishes? In fact, people ate zucchinis so infrequently that most American gardeners did not even plant them in their own gardens, but opted for store-bought instead. What a silly notion ... zucchini grows easily and abundantly ... and it is a premium choice for letting your genuine green thumb shine. It also preserves incredibly well so that you can show off your culinary skills by presenting a summer favorite in the dead of winter.

History of Zucchini

Although zucchini is sometimes called by its nickname Italian squash, it is native to Central and South America dating back as early as 7000 B.C. Zucchini reached North America by way of its southern neighbors who ventured north, while early European explorers introduced zucchini to Italy and other countries in Europe. At first, the Italians grew zucchini merely for its sweet, edible blossoms. Eventually though they began experimenting with the hearty fruit itself, creating many of the delectable dishes that resulted in zucchini being dubbed Italian squash.

Growing Zones

Zucchini can be grown in all of the U.S. growing zones. However, it requires approximately 3 months of continually warm, frost-free growing conditions for the zucchini plant to produce. Optimum soil temperature is 65 – 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Like cucumbers, melons, gourds and squash, the zucchini is a member of the Cucurbitaceae family. This makes it a particularly temperature sensitive fruit. Make certain that the threat of frost has passed in your area prior to planting. You can jumpstart zucchini though by planting seeds indoors for 12-15 days before ground transplanting.

Ph Requirements

For zucchini to produce an optimum yield, your soil's Ph content should range from 5.5 – 6.5. It produces incredibly well in soil in which natural compost has been added. Natural compost aerates the soil allowing for better absorption of rain and for deeper penetration of the zucchini plant's root system. Optimum soil for growing zucchini will include high amounts of nitrogen as well as moderate amounts of potassium and phosphorus. Make certain to include natural organic materials to your compost so that your zucchini produces an abundant supply.

Planting

Zucchini can be planted by direct seeding or by transplanting young plants that have been started indoors. It is less expensive to plant your own seeds, but more time consuming than to purchase zucchini plants that are already ready for transplanting into your garden.

Plant Depth: plant 1 – 1 ½ inches deep.

Plant Spacing: space 24 – 30 inches apart.

Row Spacing: allow 2 – 4 feet between rows.

Stakes and Cages

Like other members of the Cucurbitaceae family, zucchini is primarily a vine grower, except for certain hybrid varieties that grow on bushes. It is an avid climber, which lends it well to supporting with stakes and cages. However, if allowed to climb too high, the zucchini fruit can become separated from the stem due to its weight causing it to drop from the vine. This causes bruising to the fruit and deteriorates its quality.

Select stakes and cages that are longer in shape rather than higher so that gravity does not become your gardening enemy. A smart choice in growing zucchini is to plant it in outer areas of your garden so that it can grow outside the main area where its roaming vines will have plenty of room without taking over your other plants.

Sun Requirements

Zucchini grows best when exposed to 6 – 8 hours of direct sunlight each day. Opt for areas of your garden that receive an abundance of early morning sunshine. Plant wilting and fruit blistering occur though in zucchini when exposed to scorching 90+ degrees Fahrenheit sunlight.

Water Requirements

Once the zucchini plant begins producing fruit, it is a thirsty fellow. It is largely composed of water, which means that it requires daily watering throughout its growing season. Water your zucchini plants in the mornings for best results. More importantly, water zucchini near the base of the plant and avoid watering the foliage. These gardening techniques will help prevent mildew from forming on the plants.

Pest Problems

Cucumber Beetles – bold, black-striped and/or black-spotted yellowish-green beetle. Larvae of this pest eat zucchini plant roots and burrow through its stems injuring and destroying it.

Squash Bugs – large, brownish-black bugs that extract the zucchini plant's sap from its stems and leaves. A scavenger, this pest causes the plant to wilt and die.

Diseases

Bacterial Wilt of Cucurbits – Cucumber beetles are the culprit causing this bacterial vascular wilt disease. This disease common to zucchini first appears on an individual leaf and then spreads runners to nearby leaves causing their deterioration.

Botrytis Blight – Fungus-born, this disease is caused when zucchini are exposed to excessive rain and cooler weather. It appears as a grayish mold.

Powdery Mildew – Zucchini grown in areas of extremely high humidity are susceptible to this fungal mildew. It appears as a pale grayish-white dusting on leaves, stems and the fruit itself. Space zucchini plants further apart to inhibit the growth of this disease.

Oedema – Excessive rain and over-watering can lead to this disease in zucchini. In such conditions, plant roots absorb water at a rate of absorbency much higher than the plant requires. This increased internal pressure results in leaf cell swelling causing blister-like blemishes on both the zucchini plant and its fruit.

Maturity

Unlike some of its fellow Cucurbitaceaes, zucchini reaches maturity in a reasonably short period. You can almost always count on a 55-day period from planting to harvesting, give or take a day or two.

Harvesting

Although some zucchinis grow up to 12" in length, they are best harvested when they are between 7" – 8" long. Harvest when the fruits are approximately 1 ½" – 2" in diameter and their skins are still shiny. They should be firm, but not hard. Zucchini are prolific producers and must be harvested regularly in order to promote continued yield throughout the growing season.

Nutrition

Zucchini is one of nature's perfect gifts for a healthy diet. It is fat-free, low in calories and provides a valuable source of fiber, Vitamin C and potassium. Our bodies also benefit from the keratin, leutin, xanthenes found in zucchini.

Preserving

Although zucchini grows in the spring and summer, preserving it allows you to enjoy it all year round. Use these preserving techniques to ensure that you and your family can enjoy delightful zucchini dishes long after the growing season has passed.

Canning Wash zucchini in cold water and cut into slices about 1-inch thick. Blanche slices in a large canner for 2 minutes, remove and drain. Fill pre-heated canning jars or canisters with zucchini after draining and liquid to 1 inch below the rim. Add ½-teaspoon salt to pints and 1-teaspoon salt to quarts before covering with jar lids.

Freezing Select young, tender zucchini for freezing. Wash and slice zucchini in ½-inch thick diameters. Blanche in water for 2-3 minutes and drain. Place into plastic storage bags leaving ½-inch headspace, then close bags airtight with a vacuum sealer to protect against freezer burn before storing in freezer.

Drying Choose your best zucchinis for drying. Using bruised fruit produces poor quality in dried zucchini. Wash and cut, slice or shred fruit. Blanche prepared zucchini in water for 2 minutes and drain. Cool in cold water to about 120 degrees Fahrenheit and drain. Place drained zucchini in single layers on trays in food dehydrator and dry according to directions. Shredded zucchini dries very well. It is a perfect ingredient for hearty pasta dishes and casseroles. When the fruits have completed the drying cycle, store in small plastic bags and close with a vacuum sealer.