SUMMER DIY:
HOW TO GROW SUMMER SQUASH

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For those eager to enjoy fresh, homegrown produce this summer, there's no better place to start than your own back yard or patio. Squash is one of the most popular plants cultivated by experienced and novice gardeners alike because it establishes itself quite quickly, produces a bountiful amount of fruit, and comes in many different delectable varieties.

Gardening expert Alan Uchida invited us to Bellefontaine Nursery in Pasadena, which has been family-owned for three generations since 1939, to show us how to plant squash.

“There are two types of squash varieties—summer and winter,” Alan explains. “Summer squash are large and bushy, and come in a variety of shapes and colors. They are very prolific and peak production might give you three to four squash per day. Examples include crookneck, straightneck, and zucchini. Winter squash are vine plants and will spread throughout the garden. Common varieties include acorn, butternut, and vegetable spaghetti. Both summer and winter squash are grown in the summer, but the latter are harvested at the end of the season and can be stored for a long time.”

Today, Alan is teaching us how to plant zucchini, which is one of the most popular types of summer squash. He tells us that the first step is to choose the right location. Squash thrive in full sun (a minimum of six hours of sunlight). “A place with good air circulation is always ideal,” adds Alan. “The air movement will help to discourage fungus, such as powdery mildew. It also helps the plants to have an airy environment so that you have fewer pest [aphids, mites] problems.”

The next step is to prepare the soil. Alan advises us that squash, like most plants, grow best in soil that is rich in nutrients and organic matter as he prepares soil in a planting bed and a pot to demonstrate both methods of planting. He tells us that if we are planning to plant in our backyards, we should mix our existing soil with a premium soil amendment. If we are planting in a pot on our patios [Alan recommends using at minimum a round 15-gallon container, approximately 16- to 18-inches across with holes in the bottom for drainage], we should fill it with a nutrient-rich organic raised bed mix (a combination of potting mix and garden soil).

Once the soil is prepared, Alan pauses to tell us that we now have a decision to make—whether to plant seeds or seedlings (generally available in single pots or six-packs). He explains that there are a lot more varieties of squash available in seed form; however, it will take longer for them to grow. Seedlings are more expensive on a per-plant basis and come in fewer varieties but will fruit much faster and come packed in nutrient-rich soil to give them a boost when planted.

Demonstrating with the seedlings first, Alan creates a mound of soil in the prepared bed and digs three holes about five inches deep and twelve inches apart. He removes each plant from the six-pack container by gently grabbing the base of the plant with one hand while simultaneously pushing its segment of the plastic container underneath with the other. He places the seedlings directly into the ground and covers them with the surrounding soil, making sure that none of the soil from the six-pack is visible. “It’s best to plant them at either soil level or above,” he explains. “I like planting slightly above so that we don’t get crown rot or root rot, which are fungal infections. You want the plant to be raised up and a little fluffy.”

Alan then waters the seedlings, which not only provides them with necessary moisture, but also helps to gently compact the soil around their roots. He notes that squash should be watered at the surface of the soil and the soil should be allowed to dry between watering. “Try to avoid watering too much from the top, because powdery mildew is often caused by excessive leaf contact or late afternoon watering,” Alan says. “Following a regular schedule before the temperature rises on summer days is ideal. Use your common sense when watering the plants, keeping in mind that soil should be moist but not soggy.”

He finishes by sprinkling an organic vegetable fertilizer approximately five inches from the center of each plant—not directly on top—so it will ultimately reach the roots. “Squash love rich soil and to be fertilized,” he says. “Do a light fertilizing with vegetable food when you first plant, then continue fertilizing after the first flowers appear. You should be fertilizing every two to three weeks.”

Alan next shows us how to plant squash seeds. He once again creates a mound of soil, although he notes that the seeds could also just be placed directly into the prepared soil. He opens a seed packet and presses three seeds a half inch below
the surface of the soil with his thumb and forefinger, then covers them. He continues to plant more seeds, making sure to allow eight inches between each cluster of three. He notes that when gardening in a smaller space, like a container, it's okay to space the seeds a bit closer together. Once he is done placing the seeds, he waters and fertilizes.

With the basics of planting covered, Alan turns his attention to pest control—a necessary topic of discussion, particularly when attempting organic gardening. He advises us to “keep an organic spray such as All Seasons Oil Spray on hand to control aphids, mites and cucumber beetles, using as needed.” He also tells us that planting marigolds adjacent to garden produce provides an eye-catching way to repel garden pests that like to prey on young, succulent vegetation because they generally do not like marigolds’ pungent fragrance. Alan quickly plants some zucchini seedlings in the pot he prepared earlier and shows us how he plants marigolds close to them but tries to be mindful of providing space for the zucchini to grow. He notes that in planting beds he generally places marigolds 18 to 24 inches away from summer squash plants to give them ample room.

Alan tells us that while it is important to try to keep the garden pests away, it is also hugely beneficial to attract insect pollinators like bees, butterflies and moths to increase fruit production. All squash plants have both male and female flowers because they are unisexual—the male pollen therefore needs to be brushed onto the female flower that will bear the squash. Having extra pollinators around is a big help! Marigolds not only repel pests, but also attract pollinators. Alan also likes to plant sweet alyssum—a groundcover with multiple clusters of sweet-smelling small flowers—around areas where he plants fruits and vegetables. He adds a sweet alyssum with white flowers to the edge of the pot with the seedlings and marigolds, noting that the plant will grow over the side and create a beautiful effect, and sure enough, within moments of planting, a scout bee visits the container—mission accomplished!

Alan remarks that summer squash plants generally produce their first flowers within a couple of weeks and yield their first fruits approximately 40 to 50 days from the day they are initially planted. He says that zucchini should be harvested as soon as they are four to six inches long, while their skin is still tender. Harvesting is easy—hold the zucchini fruit in one hand and cut the stem with a pruner or knife with the other. Zucchini can be stored in a cool, moist place for up to two weeks, and can also be canned or frozen. Alan chuckles that we may want to consider the latter two options after many weeks of abundant production. “And at the end of the season when your plants have given you every bit that you could possibly eat, let that last squash develop into a big size,” Alan advises. “After you pick it, split it open and let it dry under the sun. Then you can take the seeds out for the following season and enjoy it all over again.”

Bellefontaine Nursery is located at 838 S. Fair Oaks Ave. in Pasadena. It is open Mon., Tues., & Thurs. — Sat. from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Sun. from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. (626) 796-0747. http://www.bellefontainenursery.com.