

The Vegetable That Tastes Like Candy



Talk about a maligned and shunned vegetable! I've been walking by this golden beauty in my grocery store for decades. I thought they just looked like massively large peanuts.

We ate acorn squash in my family. We didn't venture past the big green acorn to try out other options. I've totally missed the flavor and health benefits of this beautiful vegetable for way too long. Now I'm a huge fan.

Butternut Squash. Let's start with a little history lesson:

Butternut squash is a winter squash. Zucchini and yellow zucchini would be summer varieties. The ones with the harder shells on them are winter squashes. They are easy to recognize in the produce department.

All squashes have their ancestry in North America. Over 10,000 years ago the Indians were planting squash. They were part of what they called the "Three Sisters" – maize (corn), beans, and then squash. The Native Americans prized their squash because it had such a nice shelf-life and would travel well if necessary.

The benefits of butternut squash go way beyond a nice hard shell. The innards are full of health benefits, too. The flesh is full of vitamins A and C. The seeds are packed with protein and heart-healthy fats. So don't just roast pumpkin seeds this year. Save some of the ones from the butternut squash! The seeds are smaller and more tender than the cousin from the pumpkin.

Butternut squash is an amazingly healthy vegetable. It's got antioxidants in it.

Antioxidants help prevent cancer. It's got properties in it that will help prevent arthritis and can reduce your chances of lung cancer. It's also good for your eyes because it has lutein in it. Imagine your squash can help you keep from developing cataracts and age-related macular degeneration which can lead to blindness. All that from a vegetable. The power is packed in that huge peanut-shaped wonder with the flesh-colored skin.

This squash will even help with constipation or other digestive problems. It's chock-full of fiber and has 30% fewer carbs than potatoes. I'm going to try to convince you to serve this at your holiday table this year instead of potatoes. Butternut squash is versatile, too. You can roast it; which is my favorite because that's what brings out the sweetness. You can puree it, put it in soups and stews, you can bake it, or even boil it.

Prepping a butternut squash can be a bit intimidating. That might be part of why I didn't try one sooner. I know from experience how hard an acorn squash can be to cut. The butternut looks like it would be hard as a rock. But don't let that deter you. With a bit of care and practice and you'll be an ace at it.

The first thing you need is a sharp knife. My Dad would tell you that in order to cook ANYTHING the first thing you need is a sharp knife. He'd contend that a sharp knife is a lot safer than a dull one. Chefs would agree. When I worked in restaurants as a

young foodie, I noticed the knife sharpening company came every Sunday night. They took the knives away and left us with a whole set of super-sharp ones. The knives never went more than a week without being sharpened. Keep that in mind when you think of your home knives. I take mine at least once a quarter to be professionally sharpened. I can tell when they need it. Just try cutting a tomato. If the knife doesn't slide right through...you are in need of sharpening.

But I digress.

Here's how I prep a butternut squash for roasting. I take my knife and cut off each end. About an inch of clearance will do it. Hold firmly with one hand and slide the knife down through the squash. If the knife gets stuck I carefully raise the squash with the knife hooked to it and tap the squash with a knife inserted onto my cutting board. That extra force gets the knife to go through. Keep your other hand out of the way. Or use it to hold the other end of the squash. Then I peel it. I just use a vegetable peeler. Be sure to throw the peels in the compost or garbage. Garbage disposals don't like those peels. I promise you that.

Then I cut the squash in half across to make two smaller chunks. Now I have flat sides so things get easier. Lift the one piece up on its side and cut through. If there are seeds, scrape them and the stringy parts out. If I am roasting cubes I just cut the rest into rings and I can easily cut into cubes.

If I am making fries I just cut long pieces. And If I am making the gratin I am looking for slices that are a bit bigger. They might not be shaped exactly like potato slices, but no matter.

You are ready to roast.

Cheers,