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## **ADD WINTER SQUASH TO FALL MENUS**

Fall has arrived with breathtaking foliage, cooler weather, Halloween decorations and new vegetables in season. One of my favorites is winter squash which includes a variety of squashes - acorn, butternut, hubbard and spaghetti squash. They date back to the time of the colonists and make a wonderful dish to celebrate the new season.

The squash we refer to as winter squash comes in round and elongated, scalloped and pear-shaped varieties with flesh that ranges from golden-yellow to brilliant orange. Most winter squash are vine-type plants whose fruits are harvested when fully mature. They take longer to mature than summer squash (3 months or more) and are best harvested once the cool weather of fall sets in. They can be stored in a cool basement-hence the name "winter" squash.

Winter squash have hard, thick skins; quite a contrast from our summer varieties with tender skins that we often don't even peel before preparation. They store well in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place for up to one month. To cook them, winter squash can be cut in halves or pieces; remove fibers and seeds; then bake, steam, or boil the squash. Keep the quantity of water small, when cooking in water, to avoid losing flavor and nutrients. Many of these hard-shelled squash are cut in half, baked, and served in the shell. If you've ever peeled winter squash you know the challenge, so the option of baking them then scooping out the pulp is much easier. The microwave works best for me. To microwave hard-shelled squash just pierce the shell with a knife or long-tined fork then microwave to soften and use for pies, casseroles, soufflés, pancakes, and custards, whatever recipe you choose.

A small serving of cooked winter squash, only 1/2 cup cooked, provide 3 grams of fiber, and 448 mg potassium, more than a medium banana, tomato, or orange. Vitamin A, in the form of beta-carotene, is high providing 18% of the daily value.

One pound of winter squash equals about 2 cups of cooked, mashed squash. Inspect before purchase since they are prone to decay. Select squash that are firm and heavy for their size. The

rind should be hard; soft rinds may indicate that the squash is watery and lacking in flavor, and may even be starting to spoil.

To store place squash on top of thick pads of newspapers in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location. Check on a regular basis for spoilage. If you purchase cut pieces of squash, refrigerate tightly wrapped and use within five days.

Bake winter squash, then scrape out the pulp. Follow these four simple steps: 1) Wash and cut squash in half crosswise. 2) Remove seeds and string. 3) Place in a pan, shell side up and bake at 325° - 350° F for one hour or more (depending on size) until it is tender. 4) Scrape the pulp from the shell and put it through a ricer, blender, strainer, or food mill for recipe desired or freeze for later use.

To Microwave: wash and pierce with long-tined fork. Microwave on high for 5- 12 minutes depending on size, until softened. Squash can also be cut in half and placed in microwave on high. Cover with a piece of waxed paper. Acorn Squash cooked in this manner is quick and easy. After cooking add flavor by adding a small amount of maple syrup or brown sugar, cinnamon, margarine and nuts or raisins.

## **STUFFED ACORN SQUASH**

3 acorn squash  
1/2 cup wild rice  
1/2 cup brown rice  
1/4 cup wheat berries  
1/2 cup barley  
1/2 cup dried cranberries  
1/2 cup toasted almonds  
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon or all spice  
3 Tablespoons of fresh herbs: rosemary, thyme, oregano, sage  
Optional: 1/2 teaspoon cardamom  
Black pepper

Combine brown and wild rice, wheat berries, and barley in saucepan. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and cover. Cook until tender (25-40 minutes). Add dried cranberries, almonds, and spices into rice mixture. Cut squash in half widthwise. Remove seeds. Cut a thick slice from the bottom of each half so it sits flat in the pan. Fill squash halves with 1/2 cup rice mixture each. Place halves in deep baking pan. Fill pan with water. Cover pan with foil. Bake at 350° for 50 minutes. Serves 6.

## **BUTTERNUT SQUASH PIZZA**

Homemade pizza dough or fresh/frozen premade dough  
1 small butternut squash- peeled, seeded, and thinly sliced  
1 teaspoon fresh rosemary  
1 cup red onion, sliced  
3 Tablespoons olive oil  
Black pepper  
Optional: 1 Tablespoon grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 400°. Roast mixture of squash, onion, rosemary, pepper, and olive oil for 20 minutes. Increase temperature to 500°. Roll dough into 8-inch rounds on a floured surface. Place the rounds on a pizza stone or baking sheet. Layer squash mixture over the rounds and bake for 8 minutes. Add cheese, cool slightly, slice, and serve.

## **SPAGHETTI SQUASH FLORENTINE**

To cook spaghetti squash:

Wash squash and pierce with long-tined fork. Cook on high for 8-12 minutes or until squash is soft. Cut in half remove seeds and separate into strands by scraping with a fork. Spoon spaghetti strands in buttered 9 x 13 inch baking dish.

Mix together:

1 cup low-fat ricotta cheese

2 eggs

1 tablespoon Italian seasoning (I used 2 teaspoons each – fresh marjoram, fresh thyme and fresh parsley, finely chopped.)

Stir in:

1 – 10 ounce package frozen, chopped spinach, thawed and well drained.

Spread over spaghetti squash in casserole dish.

Pour: 16 ounces of tomato sauce or spaghetti sauce over mixture.

Top with: 1 cup shredded, mozzarella cheese and sprinkle with 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese.

Bake at 350° oven for 30 minutes or until hot and bubbly.

Deborah Rhoades, MA, RD, LDN, is a licensed Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Sciences. For more information about the Frederick County Extension Office check out our website <http://www.Frederick.umd.edu/>

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