

Z Is For ... Zucchini

Green and yellow zucchini are also types of summer squash. There are numerous varieties of zucchini. Each has unique features (appearance, color, and taste) distinguishing it from other varieties.

If you want an inexpensive vegetable, you can find an abundance of zucchini this time of year. While zucchini is treated as a vegetable in the culinary realm, it's technically the fruit of the zucchini flower.

Did you know that the blossoms of summer squash plants are also edible? Be brave and give them a try! To prepare the blossoms, trim the end near the stem and remove the flower parts from the inside with scissors. Use a pastry brush to gently remove any dirt or pollen. Wash blossoms carefully just before using them. Drain on paper towels.

Squash blossoms can be enjoyed raw or cooked. Sprinkle blossom pieces over a salad, cooked pasta, quesadillas, pizza, or frittata; simmer in soup; sauté with summer vegetables; or bake stuffed with cheese and herbs. They're also delicious battered and fried.

The healthiest way to eat zucchini is raw, which preserves all its vitamins and minerals! To make it even healthier, leave the skin on the zucchini. Zucchini is 95% water. The high water content makes zucchini a low-calorie food.

One medium zucchini (about 1 cup raw) has approximately 35 calories. It is a good source of C, A, and several B vitamins. Zucchini also contains smaller amounts of valuable minerals such as potassium and manganese. Leave the skin intact to obtain the full benefit of fiber and nutrients contained in zucchini.

Whether purchasing or picking zucchini fresh from the garden, choose young zucchini that are small to medium in size. For best quality, opt for young zucchini 6 to 8 inches long and no larger than 2 inches in diameter.

Avoid over-mature large zucchini with dull surfaces since they usually have tough rinds, enlarged seeds, and dry, stringy flesh with less flavor.

When selecting zucchini, choose squash that is firm and heavy for its size. The skin should be bright, glossy, and without insect damage, nicks, soft spots, wrinkles, or decay.

For best storage, do not wash the zucchini until ready to use. Wash zucchini just before preparation to maximize freshness.

If you plan to cook the veggie within a few days of purchase or harvest, the best way to store it is on the counter at room temperature. If you wait more than a few days before using it, place unwashed zucchini in an open or perforated plastic bag in the refrigerator's crisper drawer for longer storage. Be sure the zucchini is dry when you put it in the bag, as moisture will encourage mold and spoilage.

Wash all zucchini just before using it. Rub the skin gently under cool running water. Once clean, use a paper towel or a clean towel to dry the zucchini.

Zucchini has a slightly sweet, mild taste. It has a soft, spongy texture in the middle and a tender peel. Zucchini is a versatile food that can be eaten both raw and cooked. Each method gives the zucchini a slightly different taste and texture, with options to fit anyone's preferences! Zucchini is easy to cook and has many uses. Zucchini can be baked, boiled, fried, grilled, roasted, steamed, sautéed or stir-fried.

Too many herbs and spices mask the delicate flavor of zucchini, so use herbs and spices sparingly.

For those interested in unique ways to cook tomatoes, tomatillos, peppers, or zucchini, University of Wyoming Extension recently published three new recipe publications in the *Cooking It Up!* series.

The three latest publications are titled *Cooking It Up! From The Tomato Vine and Tomatillos*; *Cooking It Up! From The Pepper Plant*; and *Cooking It Up! From The Zucchini Patch*.