UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Summer Squash

Marketing and Market Outlook

Fresh market options for Kentucky-grown summer squash (yellow straightneck, yellow crookneck and zucchini) include wholesale markets, cooperatives, farmers' markets and roadside stands. Sales to local retail markets, such as supermarkets, are also an option. Wholesale production is more profitable when producers are able to use season extension techniques to capture early or late markets. Although traditionally not as profitable as other summer produce, summer squash is an essential crop in a farmers' market or roadside stand fresh vegetable mix. Some producers have discovered profitable niche markets selling edible squash blossoms to restaurants.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Summer squash produces best in well-drained soils. This crop is usually grown for an early summer market (harvested in mid- to late-June) or for an early fall market (harvested when prices begin to rise in September). Growers producing squash for the late summer/early fall market usually encounter serious virus disease problems and should plant either a variety with the precocious yellow trait that masks virus symptoms or one with virus resistance.

Squash is a warm season crop that should not be seeded until all danger of frost has passed. Black plastic on raised beds with trickle irrigation will speed soil warming and can dramatically increase early and total summer squash yields. Seed or transplants can be planted directly through the plastic either by hand, with a waterwheel setter, or with machinery designed for direct seeding through plastic. White plastic mulch can be used for July plantings if squash is grown for fall markets. If bees are not abundant in the field at flowering time, hives should be placed next to the field, with at least one hive per acre.

Pest management

Potential disease problems include Choanephora fruit rot, scab, and Phytophthora blight. Viruses, downy mildew and powdery mildew mainly cause losses in late summer and fall plantings. Cucumber beetles, squash vine borer, spider mites and squash bugs can become serious pests if not controlled. Scouting to monitor populations can help the grower determine when and how often insecticides should be applied. Special precautions should be taken with insecticide treatments during bloom in order to avoid damaging bee populations.

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Harvest and storage

Harvest summer squash at the proper size for your market and

before the skin becomes tough and hard. The skin should still have a glossy appearance. Fruit will be ready for harvest two to five days after flowers have fully opened. Squash should be cut from the plant leaving a portion of the stem attached to the fruit. Fruit must be handled very gently to avoid scarring. Harvests may be required every other day or even daily.

This crop is normally sold on the fresh, wholesale market in ½ bushel waxed cardboard cartons or $1^{1}/_{9}$ bushel carton or wire bound crates. Squash in each crate or carton should be uniform in size to meet the produce buyer's count and weight requirements. Whenever possible, summer squash should be marketed quickly and not stored.

Labor requirements

Labor needs per acre for summer squash grown on black plastic mulch with drip irrigation are approximately 25 hours for production, 130 hours for harvest and 100 hours for packing/grading. An additional 10 hours per acre is needed for plastic removal following harvest.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation and the purchase of seed or transplants. Additional start-up costs can include the installation of an irrigation system and plastic mulch.

Production costs for plasticulture yellow crookneck summer squash are estimated at $1,110 per acre, with harvest and marketing costs at $3,160 per acre. Total expenses per acre, including both variable and fixed costs, can come to approximately $4,324.

Since returns vary depending on actual yields and market prices, the following per acre returns to land and management estimates are based on three different scenarios. Conservative estimates represent the University of Kentucky's statewide average cost and return estimates for 2005.

Pessimistic	*Conservative*	*Optimistic*
$(710)*	$651	$2,042

* *Parentheses indicate a negative number, i.e. a net loss*

More Information

- Marketing Options for Commercial Vegetable Growers, ID-134 (University of Kentucky, 1999) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id134/id134.htm
- Summer Squash Marketing Fact Sheet (University of Kentucky, 2005) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/squash2005.pdf
- Vegetable and Melon Enterprise Budgets (University of Kentucky, 2004) *interactive spreadsheets* http://www.uky.edu/Ag/AGEcon/pubs/software/budgets_veg_melon.html
- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers, ID-36 (University of Kentucky) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.htm
- Drip Irrigation for Vegetables, MF-1090 (Kansas State University, 1993) http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/hort2/samplers/MF1090.asp
- Guide to Commercial Summer Squash Production, ANR-1014 (Alabama Cooperative Extension, 1997) http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1014
- Plastic Mulches for Vegetables, MF-1091 (Kansas State University, 1993) http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/hort2/samplers/MF1091.asp