

NEWS RELEASE
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SQUASH PROBLEMS

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

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Some local gardeners have called recently with problems getting their squash and cucumber plants to produce fruit. In order to understand why this may be happening in your garden, you need to understand some basic botany.

Most garden vegetables such as beans, peppers or tomatoes have complete flowers. This means that each flower has both male structures (pollen producing stamens) and female structures (pistils). The squash family - cucumbers, squashes and melons - has incomplete flowers. Although the blossoms look alike, each flower is either male with stamens and no pistil, or female with a pistil and no stamens. Complete flowers are usually able to pollinate themselves, but incomplete flowers need some help, in the way of bees or other pollinating insects, to move pollen from male to female flowers.

If you have grown zucchini squash and had to keep up with the fruit that is produced, you would probably agree that usually there is no problem in pollen being moved from male to female flowers. However, sometimes only male flowers may develop on a plant, especially early in the season. Sometimes, even when both male and female flowers are present, there are not enough bees or other insects around to do a good job of pollinating.

There are two ways to handle the squash fruit set problem. The first way is to be patient. When male flowers, female flowers, and pollinating insects are all present at the right times, you

will begin to harvest squash. If you are not quite so patient, and wish to help nature along a bit, you might want to try some hand pollinating.

In order to hand pollinate, you need to know the difference between male and female flowers. The female flowers have a swollen portion beneath the flower petals. This portion, called the ovary, looks like a tiny squash or cucumber, which it later becomes after being pollinated. The male flowers do not have this swollen portion, but instead are attached to the plant by a thin stem. To transfer the pollen, take a small soft paintbrush and rub it in the middle of a newly opened male flower. The pollen will look like yellow dust on the brush. Be sure you have a fully opened male flower, or the pollen will not be ready for release. Then brush the pollen into the center of the female blossom.

Within two or three days you should know whether you were successful. First, the blossom will wither. Then, the tiny fruit will begin to grow. If the squash has been properly pollinated, it will fill out to the blossom end, and depending on the weather, you should be able to pick it within a week. If the fruit has not been pollinated, the tip near the blossom end doesn't fill out, and after a couple of days begins to shrivel. You may want to pick off any unpollinated fruits, because they drain the plant of some energy. Hand pollinating may be useful early in the season, or when your plants first begin to bloom. Bees will eventually find your plants and do the job for you.

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