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## EC92-1248 Growing Squash and Pumpkin for Food and Ornamentation

Laurie Hodges

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, lhodges1@unl.edu

Frederick P. Baxendale

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, fbaxendale1@unl.edu

David S. Wysong

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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# **Growing Squash and Pumpkin**

**for food and ornamentation**



**By Laurie Hodges, Extension Vegetable Specialist,  
Frederick P. Baxendale, Extension Entomologist  
and David S. Wysong, Extension Plant Pathologist\***



umpkin and squash are American members of the plant family *Cucurbitaceae*. Cucumbers, originally from India, muskmelons from the Middle East, and watermelons from Africa are other members of this important family of vine crops. Squash, like corn, was domesticated by Indians of Central America and spread to the 48 contiguous states of the United States before the arrival of Columbus. Squash was among the first vegetables to be planted in Nebraska.

## Uses

These crops can be used in many ways. The quick-growing, tender-skinned summer squash, when harvested and used while still immature, are delicious either steamed and buttered or sliced and baked with onions, bacon, tomato sauce and Italian seasoning.

Long, dark green "Italian" summer squash varieties may be used raw like cucumbers in salads. Yellow summer squash varieties, either straightneck or crookneck, are tender and sweet. Served with butter & sauteed onions, they are popular with many who don't like the dark green summer squashes.

Smaller, hard-skinned winter squash varieties are good when cut in half, baked and served in the shell with a bit of salt and butter or with brown sugar. They are also delicious as a main dish when baked with sausage, diced onion and bread crumbs in the seed cavity.

Pumpkin usually has finer-textured flesh than squash and is better for pies or custard. Squash or pumpkin pulp is a good ingredient for preparing moist quick breads.

The large male blossoms of squash or pumpkin are tasty when dipped in egg batter and fried.

Male blossoms are more numerous than the female blossoms that have an immature fruit at the base of the flower. The male blossoms eventually dry up and fall off so no damage is done when they are removed, as long as a few are left to supply pollen for fertilizing the female flowers.

Weight conscious people will be pleased to learn

that squash has only 14-45 calories per 100 grams (roughly 4 ounces). The dark yellow and orange squashes and pumpkins also provide significant vitamin A.

Although primarily grown for eating, pumpkin and squash also have attractive "tropical" appearing foliage, large showy yellow blossoms, and interesting shapes and colors of fruit. These features add ornamental value to their use in the home garden.

The mound-shaped plants of summer squash and bush-type winter squash and pumpkin provide a temporary, quick growing, 1- to 3-foot tall border. They may also serve as accent plants for the corner of a house, trailer, patio or garden. The creamy-colored, scalloped fruit of the mature 'patty pan' summer squash, the brilliant yellow, warted fruit of the mature crookneck summer squash, and the brightly contrasting orange, green and white variegations of the unusual Turks Turban squash are decorative centerpieces in the fall.

The pumpkin's prominent role in fairy tales, American legends, and at Halloween makes it of special interest to children. Its seed is large and germinates quickly. Squash and pumpkin are relatively free of pests and easily grown by children and other beginning gardeners. Bush type plants are available for planting in the limited space available in urban home gardens.

## Culture

Pumpkin and squash are "summer" warm-season crops and subject to damage from cold soils and frost. The seed does not produce vigorous, healthy seedlings if planted when soil temperatures are below 60° F. Planting should be delayed until after the first week in May in eastern Nebraska, mid May in central Nebraska and the last week of May in the Panhandle. If soil moisture is adequate, the seed should emerge five to seven days after planting when frost hazard is low.

Transplants can be used but are not generally recommended due to the sensitivity of these crops to root restriction and transplant shock. Summer squash transplants should not be more than 3 weeks old or have more than one fully developed leaf at the time of transplanting to minimize transplant shock. Trans-



plants of winter squash and pumpkins should be avoided. Seed germination is rapid when planted directly in warm soil and a more vigorous plant will result.

Pumpkin and squash can be grown successfully on most Nebraska soils but they do not tolerate wet or poorly aerated conditions. In most years, the eastern half of Nebraska receives sufficient rainfall for growing these crops. Supplemental irrigation usually is required in the western half and may be helpful in the east in certain years. Commercial production should be irrigated regardless of location for maximum yield of quality fruit.

Pumpkins and squash, like the melons, require bees for pollination and subsequent fruit set. Each female flower is open for less than one day. If pollination is successful, the swollen base of the female flower will develop into a mature fruit. Strong winds and cool temperatures restrict pollination by reducing bee activity. High air temperatures and low relative humidity, especially high night temperatures, can reduce pollen viability and fruit set.

## Varieties

For scientific classification, botanists have divided the members of plant families into a category called genus which is further subdivided into species. For example, cucumbers and muskmelon belong to the genus *Cucumis* but to different species, *Cucumis sativus* L. and *Cucumis melo* L. respectively.

Classification of pumpkin and squash is more confusing since the words "pumpkin" and "squash" are popular names given to three plant species in the genus *Cucurbita* which contains pumpkin and squash. Botanists have named these three closely related species *Cucurbita pepo* L. (acorn, yellow crookneck, patty pan, ornamental gourds, many ornamental jack o'lantern pumpkins), *Cucurbita maxima* Duchesne (buttercup, hubbard, and banana squashes, many very large pumpkins), and *Cucurbita moschata* Duchesne (butternut squash and some pumpkins grown primarily for the processing industry for pies and baby food).

What we commonly call "pumpkin" and "squash" are found in each of these species. Part of the confusion lies in the situation that varieties in the *Cucurbita*

*pepo* group will cross-fertilize with each other and with those in *Cucurbita moschata*. Varieties in *Cucurbita maxima* will mix with each other and may mix with varieties of *Cucurbita moschata*. *Cucurbita pepo* and *Cucurbita maxima* do not mix nor, as is sometimes believed, do *Cucurbita pepo*, *moschata* or *maxima* (pumpkin and squash) mix with cucumbers, muskmelon or watermelon. This cross-fertilization does not affect the fruit. However, seed saved from such inter-specific crosses will produce fruit unlike that of the female parent. The following discussion of varieties is primarily based upon types within groups having common usage.

*Summer squash* - Soft-shelled, quick-growing squash produced on bush-type plants that are first harvested while immature, about 40 to 50 days from planting, when flesh is white and juicy and seeds are tender. Characteristics of some types of summer squash are presented in Table 1.

*Winter squash* - Hard-shelled squash with yellow to orange colored flesh requiring 80 to 110 days from planting to harvest. Winter squash may be kept several weeks when properly cured and stored. Characteristics of some winter squash varieties are presented in Table 2.

*Ornamental, decorative and novelty pumpkin and squash* - Most bush-type squash and pumpkin should be considered for their ornamental value as quick-growing, mound-shaped specimens or border plants as well as producing fruit for eating. These would include all summer squash, Gold Nugget and bush Ebony winter squash and Cinderella bush pumpkin.

Bush pumpkin and bush squash require less space than the vining type and fit better into the small urban garden. Mature crookneck, straightneck and 'patty pan' summer squash produce colorful and interesting fruit having decorative value. These fruit do not keep as long as harder-shelled winter squash but they are attractive.

A list and comments regarding other varieties with decorative or novelty value are presented in Table 3. A list of several seed companies supplying a wide selection of pumpkin and squash varieties is in Table 4.



## Soil Preparation and Fertilizer

Most pumpkin and squash roots grow laterally from a taproot that may extend five feet deep. The lateral roots nearer the surface are much longer and extensive so the upper 6 to 8 inches of soil should be well prepared and fertilized. Compared with other vegetables, these vine crops require a moderate amount of nitrogen, high amount of phosphorus, and very high amount of potassium.

Most Nebraska soils are well supplied with potassium so 400 to 600 pounds per acre (1 to 1 1/2 pounds or 2 to 3 cups per 100 square feet) of 10-20-0 or equivalent fertilizer worked into the soil before planting will assure adequate nutrition for the rapidly extending roots of the vining varieties. Bush-type varieties should receive 2 to 4 tablespoons of this fertilizer per hill area of about six square feet (2' x 3').

Well-rotted manure or compost will help produce healthy plants and large, specimen fruit. As with most garden crops manure should be broadcast and plowed under in the fall. If only a limited quantity is available, it should be thoroughly mixed into the hill area ahead of planting. Do not use any manure in the hill unless it is well decomposed.

## Planting

Pumpkin and squash are warm weather crops so planting should be delayed until spring soil temperatures average 60° F. Latest planting should allow sufficient time for fruit to set and mature before frost.

Compared to winter squash fruit, the softer-shelled pumpkin does not hold up as well in the field when maturing during hot weather. It is better to sow seed of these varieties later in the planting season. Suggested planting dates for varietal groups in different regions of Nebraska are in Table 5.

The season in eastern Nebraska is long enough for a second planting of quick-growing summer squash. Earlier harvest of summer squash can be obtained by starting transplants 10 to 15 days before the first field seeding date. Since squashes do not transplant well if the roots are disturbed, transplants should be grown in decomposable peat pots or containers that can be easily removed at transplanting.

Squash and pumpkin are usually planted in hills

but may be drilled in rows for later thinning. Spacing depends upon the type and vigor of the plant. Vigorous, large-fruited vining varieties are best spaced with hills 10 x 10 feet. Summer squash and bush-type winter squash and pumpkin can be planted much closer at 2 x 3 or 3 x 4 foot spacing. Smaller-fruited, less vigorous vining winter squashes such as butternut, acorn, etc., are planted at 3 x 3 or 3 x 4 foot spacing, although many growers will use 5 x 6 or 7 x 8 foot spacing. Equidistant, closer spacing is more effective in reducing weed competition and maximizing yields. Miniature pumpkins can be planted at 2.5 x 8 ft spacing.

One packet of summer squash or bush-type winter squash or pumpkin seed will plant about eight hills or 15 to 20 feet of row. Two to three pounds will plant one acre. One packet of winter squash will plant 4 to 6 hills. Plant 3 to 5 seeds per hill 1 inch deep, and thin to one or two vigorous plants when well established. Avoid disturbing roots of remaining plants in the hill by cutting off or pinching off rather than pulling out excess plants. When drilled in rows, plant single seed and thin as necessary to space plants 18 to 24 inches apart.

## Diseases

Bacterial wilt, fruit rot and powdery mildew are among the more common vine crop diseases in Nebraska. The bacterial wilt organism is transmitted by small yellow and black striped and spotted cucumber beetles which begin to feed as the emerging seedling first breaks through the soil. Masses of bacteria plug the plant's water conducting tissue causing apparently healthy plants to suddenly wilt and die. Bacterial wilt is best prevented by controlling the cucumber beetles with Sevin or Methoxychlor when plants first break through the soil.

Fruit rot symptoms differ on the various types of pumpkins and squash and may not appear until after harvest. A black decay may appear at the blossom end. A dark, greasy, or water-soaked spot may appear anywhere on the fruit. Fruit rot on butternut squash is exhibited by a bronzing of the fruit surface. Serious fruit rot damage may be prevented with a crop rotation which avoids planting vine crops in the same area more than once in three years. If this is not possible, spraying with Bravo or Benlate at 7- to 10-day intervals when the fruit begins to develop will



give some control.

Powdery mildew first appears as white powdery spots on the upper leaf surfaces and, under favorable conditions, may cover the entire leaf. It is usually most prevalent toward the end of the season when vine growth hampers spraying but fortunately when most of the fruit is near maturity. Benlate, Bravo, or Kocide 101 applied at first signs of mildew, with a second application in 7 to 10 days, should give control on bush-type plants.

## Weed Control

Good seedbed preparation and timely cultivation are the best ways to control weeds in small gardens. Shallow cultivation is necessary to avoid injury to roots near the surface and should only be done when necessary to destroy weed growth.

Weed control is important for the first 6 to 8 weeks after planting. After vine growth has covered the soil surface, weed competition is minimal. A few herbicides are available for use in larger plantings of pumpkins and squash. Effective herbicides are currently registered to provide control of warm-season grasses and certain broadleaf weeds. Contact the Cooperative Extension office for currently registered chemicals.

## Insects

Among the more important insect pests of squash and pumpkins are squash vine borers, cucumber beetles, squash bugs, cutworms and aphids.

### *Squash Vine Borers*

These insects can be destructive to most pumpkins and squashes, but some varieties are more susceptible than others. Larvae have cream-colored, smooth bodies and brown heads. A fully-grown larva is about an inch long. This pest overwinters as a pupa in the soil.

Wasp-like black and red, clear-winged moths emerge from late May through July and deposit brick-red eggs at the base of plants just above the soil line. Larvae hatch from the eggs in about a week and immediately bore into stems. Larval tunneling disrupts water and nutrient flow and causes stems to split and decay. Sawdust-like excrement and bacterial ooze often is pushed from holes in infested stems.

Infested plants fail to produce fruits, wilt, and eventually may die. Serious damage mainly occurs from July through September. There is one generation each season.

Control of the squash vine borer is difficult. To reduce damage, insecticides (preferably dust formulations) must be applied regularly to the base of plants during the egg-laying period. Thorough coverage is essential for satisfactory results. Insecticides registered for control of squash vine borer include carbaryl (Sevin), malathion, pyrethrins RTU and rotenone.

Late or staggered planting may help some plants escape infestation. A liquid or paste formulation of *Bacillus thuringiensis* injected into tunnels of infested stems should help reduce the number of borers. Covering damaged portions of vines with soil promotes secondary root development and minimizes borer damage. When possible, plant borer-resistant varieties of squash. Acorn and butternut squashes are more resistant to squash vine borer injury than are buttercup, Hubbard and summer squashes.

### *Striped/Spotted Cucumber Beetles*

Although striped and spotted cucumber beetles are common from late spring through fall, they are most abundant and destructive from July through early August. While both species feed primarily on cucumbers, squashes, pumpkins and melons, the spotted cucumber beetle has a far greater host range that includes corn, green beans, potatoes, tomatoes and cabbage.

Both beetles are yellow and black and roughly 1/4-inch long. The striped species has three black stripes on the wing covers, whereas the spotted species has 12 black spots. Both species overwinter as adults. In the spring, eggs are deposited in the soil and larvae feed on the developing roots of host plants. Adults injure plants by chewing holes in leaves, stems, blossoms and fruit. Tender seedlings can be destroyed completely. Cucumber beetles also transmit the bacterial wilt organism from plant to plant.

To control cucumber beetles, treat plants on a regular basis with dust or sprays containing carbaryl (Sevin), malathion, pyrethrins RTU or rotenone. To avoid harm to pollinators such as honeybees, do not treat plants that are in bloom. If necessary, flowering



plants can be treated with a non-persistent insecticide such as rotenone or pyrethrins in the evening when honey bees are not active.

### *Squash Bugs*

Squash bugs feed exclusively on cucurbits, and prefer squash (winter and summer), pumpkin, cucumber and melon, in that order. Adults are predominantly gray, 5/8-inch long and somewhat flattened. They overwinter in surface debris and in other sheltered areas near former plant hosts. Adults emerge and migrate to new hosts in late June or July.

Bronze-colored eggs are deposited in clusters on the undersides of leaves within the "V"s formed by leaf vines. Nymphs are light gray and feed along with adults in clusters, removing sap from stems, leaves and fruit. While feeding, squash bugs inject a toxin into the plant. This causes affected areas to wilt and die. One generation occurs each year, but because of an extended egg-laying period, adults and nymphs can be present until frost. Damage is most severe from late July through September.

Effective control of squash bugs is difficult. Encourage vigorous growth of plants through proper watering and fertilization. Where squash bugs are abundant, plant more resistant types of squash such as acorn and butternut. Avoid the Hubbard type which is relatively susceptible to this insect.

Hand-pick adult bugs and nymphs and destroy egg masses to reduce infestation levels. Place small boards under plants to attract adults as they seek hiding places. Treat congregated adults with insecticidal sprays containing carbaryl (Sevin), endosulfan (Thiodan) or pyrethrins RTU. Avoid insecticidal treatments when honeybees are active in pollinating flowers (mid-morning to early evening).

### *Cutworms*

Several species of cutworms can be pests of squashes and pumpkins, but the most common are the black and variegated cutworms. Cutworm problems tend to be most severe in the spring and early summer, particularly during cool, wet weather conditions. Night-flying moths deposit eggs on grassy weeds, soil, plant debris or young plants. Newly-hatched larvae climb onto plants and feed on

foliage at night. They hide under mulches, soil clods or debris during the day.

Mature black cutworms, which are dark brown or black and greasy in appearance cut plants off at the base. Large numbers of young seedlings or transplants can be destroyed overnight when cutworms are abundant.

Variegated cutworms are gray with an orange stripe on each side of the body and a row of yellow spots along the back. Cutworms pupate in the soil and there may be two to three generations per season, depending on the species.

Cutworm injury can be reduced by placing barriers such as paper collars, tin cans with the bottoms removed, or similarly prepared plastic containers around young plants. Replace loose mulches with plastic mulches and remove nearby weedy host plants.

A preventative soil insecticide treatment may be justified in new gardens that were formerly in sod or weeds. If an infestation is suspected due to the presence of cut plants or ragged leaves, check beneath soil clods or mulches for cutworms. If cutworms are found, treat with carbaryl (Sevin) or diazinon sprays, granules or baits according to label directions.

### *Melon Aphids*

Melon aphids are greenish-yellow in color and are less than 1/8-inch long. They may be winged or wingless. Reproduction occurs rapidly. As infestations build, they consist primarily of developing immature stages.

Aphids feed by withdrawing plant sap through needle-like mouthparts. They usually conceal themselves on the undersides of leaves. Infested squash and pumpkin plants will appear stunted with yellow discoloration, curled leaves and have sticky honeydew secretions present. Damage can occur throughout the growing season.

Effective management of melon aphids requires regular inspection of plants and applications of insecticidal sprays containing diazinon, insecticidal soaps (M-Pede, Attack), malathion or pyrethrins RTU



while aphid colonies are still small. Withhold application if parasitic wasps, lady beetles, green lacewings or syrphid fly larvae are active. Thorough coverage is essential, and repeated applications may be necessary.

### Harvesting and Storage

Depending on variety, summer squash may first be harvested about 45 to 50 days after planting when the fruit is small and seeds are immature and soft. Varieties with elongate fruit should be harvested when 2" to 3" in diameter and not more than 6" to 8" long. Zucchini or Italian squash can reach this stage 3 to 4 days after the female flower opens and is pollinated. Yellow summer squash is ready to harvest 6 to 7 days after pollination. The bush scalloped squash or 'patty pan' squash is best harvested when the fruit is 3 to 4 inches in diameter, 4 to 5 days after pollination.

Summer squash skin should be soft and easily dented with the thumbnail. Flesh should be white. For best quantity and yield, plants should be harvested two to three times per week. If present, any overmature fruit should be removed. Summer squash

will keep for about two weeks if kept at high humidity in a refrigerator at 32-40° F.

Winter squash or pumpkin may be harvested when the fruit is fully sized and well-colored and the skin sufficiently hard to resist denting by the thumbnail. Maturity ranges from 60 to 80 days after pollination. Fruit will resist damage by light frost that may damage the vines but it should be removed from the field when a hard freeze is imminent.

Slight cuts and bruises will heal with corky callous tissue but fruit should be handled with care to avoid bruises or excessive damage. The soft bulbous stem of certain squash may drop off during harvest or handling. The scar will heal over if fruit is cured for 10 to 20 days at 80-85° F. with good ventilation.

Harvested fruit should be stored with good ventilation at temperatures from 50 to 55° F and relative humidity between 50 and 75 percent. Winter squash can be kept 10 or more weeks if harvested and stored properly.

**Table 1. Characteristics of summer squash varieties.**

Type and Varieties	Days to Harvest	Fruit Characteristics	Remarks
<i>Yellow Crookneck</i> Golden Summer Crookneck, Early Yellow Crookneck, Baby Crookneck, Dixie Crookneck	40-54	Bright yellow, some slightly warted, 4-6" fruit with a curved neck.	Very prolific over a long season when kept picked, young & immature.
<i>Yellow Straightneck</i> Seneca Butterbar, Early Prolific Straightneck, Baby Straightneck, Seneca Prolific, Lemondrop L, Multipik	40-54	Lemon yellow, smooth, 5-6" cylindrical fruit.	Delicate quality, high yield when kept picked.
<i>Bush Scallop</i> St. Pat Scallop, Patty Pan, White Bush Scallop	58-62 days	Creamy white, 4" diameter, pie-shaped fruit with scalloped edge.	Thick, tender, fine-grained fruit. Very mild flavor.
<i>Italian Zucchini</i> Senator, Ambassador, Seneca Zucchini, Grezini, Elite	40-54 days	Dark green, green & white striped, or mottled grey, 5-8" cylindrical fruit.	Excellent cooked or used raw in salads like cucumbers. Skin becomes bitter if fruit are large or over-mature.





**Table 2. Characteristics of winter squash varieties.**

Variety	Days to Harvest	Average fruit weight (lb.)	Fruit per hill (2 plants)	Remarks
Royal Acorn, Table Queen, Ebony	80-90	1-3	6-8	Dark green, heart-shaped fruit with hard ribbed shell and fine, orange-colored flesh.
Butternut, Waltham Butternut, Ponca	90	2-4	8-10	Nearly cylindrical fruit with smooth, thin, tan skin and deep orange flesh, high quality. 'Ponca', developed at UNL, is slightly smaller than 'Waltham' with a straighter neck (more cylindrical), excellent flavor and baking quality. Keeps until December.
Kindred	100	4-5	5-8	Turban-shaped fruit with bright reddish-gold, hard, tough skin. High quality golden yellow flesh that keeps well.
Buttercup	100	2-4	4-6	Turban shaped, dark green squash with lighter stripes or flecks. Deep, thick, dry sweet, yellow gold flesh.
Delicata	100	1-2	5-8	Oblong, cream and green striped fruit, 6-8" long. Keeps well.
Moregold	90	4-5	6-8	Thick-meated, bright orange fruit with salmon-colored stripes. Very productive.
Golden Nugget	98	1-2	12-16	Red-orange, round-oblate fruit with very hard shell to keep well. Thick, high quality flesh. Bush-type plant ideal for small gardens.
Golden Delicious	100	8-10	2-4	Heart-shaped fruit with red-orange shell. Thick, dry, medium-textured flesh with good quality.
Green Delicious	105	5-7	2-4	Fruit top-shaped with thin but hard dark green rind. Very thick, bright yellow-orange flesh of good quality.
Green Hubbard	115	10-14	1-3	Heavily warted, dark green squash with thick hard shell. Good yield and quality. Keeps well.
Golden Hubbard	110	12-16	2-4	Similar to other Hubbards but having the blue-gray color. Flesh is sweet. Fruit keeps well.
Pink Banana	105	15-30	1-3	Smooth, pink colored, long cylindrical fruit with thick hard rind that keeps well.



**Table 3. Pumpkin and squash having decorative or novelty value.**

Type and variety	Remarks
<i>Decorative Fruit</i>	
Turks Turban	100 days Brilliant colored 8-10" diameter fruit consisting of a bright orange, flattened base displaying 3 prominent nodes with contrasting red, white, dark green, cream and orange colored stripes in the shape of a turban.
<i>Halloween Carving</i>	
Connecticut Field	110 days Large, yellowish-orange fruit weighing 15-25 pounds. Fruit flattened at both ends, smooth and slightly ribbed.
Halloween	110 days 9 x 12" oblong fruit weighing about 10 pounds.
Jack O'Lantern	110 days 8 x 10" smooth, bright yellow fruit for easy carving.
Spookie	110 days 7" diameter 5-6 pound fruit with smooth hard shell. Fruit has more round shape than Halloween or Jack O'Lantern.
Cinderella	100 days Smooth, bright orange 7-pound fruit on bush-type plant. Fruit does not keep well, especially in warm weather, so it should be planted later than vine-type pumpkin. Ideal for small garden.
Sugar Pie	100 days Small round but flattened pumpkin 8-10" in diameter. Good keeper but smaller fruit and harder shell is more difficult to carve by small children.
<i>Novelty (Large Fruited)</i>	
Big Max	100 days Huge, bright pinkish orange fruit that may grow to 30-inch diameter and weigh 100 or more pounds. Skin slightly rough but may be easily carved into giant jack o'lantern.
Hungarian Mammoth	120 days Giant squash with large heavy vines that commonly grow in excess of 100 pounds. Skin color varies from dark green, cream, buff to orange. Best chances for exhibiting largest fruit at fairs with this variety.
Mammoth King	120 days Very large heart-shaped salmon-orange fruit that may grow to 100 pounds. Shell is harder and meat thicker than Big Max but color not as bright.





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