

On the Big Island of Hawaii, Anna Peach's wild plot of exotic squash provides loads of inspiration for winter's best vegetable

Squash @ A

Cinderella's pumpkin carriage has nothing on Anna Peach's Squashmobile. It's a '79 royal blue MG Midget, a car that's even mini-er than a Mini, that Peach uses to shuttle up to 300 pounds of squash at a time from her farm, Squash and Awe, high on the slopes of Waimea, to restaurants all over the Big Island of Hawaii. Her specialty: bizarre squash you've never heard of, like the Ugandan giant pink banana variegated, which is indeed giant, pink and striped, or the marina di Chioggia, a warty-looking thing named after a town near Venice.

In olive-green rubber boots, her face shaded by a tattered straw hat, Peach weaves through her improbably small quarter-acre plot, lined with lime trees, eucalyptus and bamboo, while a flock of wild chickens follow her around. Squash and Awe doesn't look like a farm at all; instead of orderly rows, squash vines—some throwing out leaves as wide as parasols—explode out of the center and meander where they please. Squash from around the world grow here, in soil built on the waste of nearby businesses. The compost, she gleefully adds, is made up of restaurant-kitchen scraps, hops from the local brewery, fish guts from fishermen and last year's tax forms, courtesy of the Waimea library.

Peach is an artist whose work, from underwater videos of seaweed to sculpture combined with couture, is as varied as the countries she traveled to—from Newfoundland to Fiji. But as a sixth-generation farmer originally from Wisconsin, perhaps it was always meant to be that she would return to working the land. The islands had been a restorative place in her childhood; she, her mother and brother visited there soon after her father, grandfather and grandmother all died within a few years of each other. "Farming seemed like a natural way to both honor my family and their hard work, as

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Hawaii only produces about 10% of its food, but in the 1960s that number was more like 50%. Anna Peach is working to change that. She grows rare varieties of squash on her tiny Hawaiian farm, like the Gori blue she's holding and the black kabocha (above right). She prides herself in having a zero-waste farm and uses such things as nitrogen-rich fish emulsion (right) from local fishermen to enrich her soil.

well as honor Hawaii the place that helped to heal me as a child," she says.

Local chefs and restaurants reap Peach's squash bounty. Merriman's restaurant in Waimea smokes whole squash and stuffs ravioli with it; at the Fairmont Orchid, executive chef Hubert Des Marais folds Peach's Hawaiian butternut squash, a hybrid she created, into a pumpkin chocolate crunch cake. "Her squash are very, very flavorful," Des Marais says. "They have a depth of flavor, and for each one of them, there's a story to tell."

Once, when Peach was delivering some fig leaf gourds, a woman from Chile stopped to tell her how she shaved the flesh and boiled it with sugar for a marmalade-like dessert. "That's part of what I like so much about these historic vegetables," says Peach. "They're, of course, artistically beautiful but it's the cultural aspect that's really interesting, the cultural link to people, to family recipes."

One of the squash Peach is most fond of is what she calls the Hawaiian black kabocha, with matte, charcoal-hued skin and deep-orange flesh. "It's one of the old varieties that disappeared when we started importing more and more squash," she says. When she found it growing in her landlord's backyard, she learned how to save the seeds, hand-pollinate the squash and keep the strain alive. Baker Creek, which publishes *The Whole Seed Catalog* and offers the largest selection of rare, heirloom varieties in the country, is now trialing the Hawaiian black kabocha. It's a process that can take years. Peach is also releasing the seeds through the Seed Savers Exchange of Decorah, Iowa.

And there are other squash that Peach is trying to save from extinction, like the Gori

blue mottled squash from the Republic of Georgia. She was given the seeds by Joseph Simcox, a botanical explorer, whom she happened to meet at a dinner party. "It was a James Bond kind of thing," she says. "It was like, 'Here's the last five remaining [seeds] in the world, good luck!'"

Peach doesn't travel as much as she used to, but now the world—in the form of squash, big and small, bumpy and smooth, blue and pink—comes to her, on her little farm in the middle of the Pacific.

"Just look at these freaky beautiful things that will grow. One of my friends said it's like the circus came to town."

Food writer **MARTHA CHENG** now has a crush on squash. Read more of her writing at curiousmartha.com. **MOLLY STEVENS** is a cooking teacher and the author of the award-winning *All About Roasting* (W.W. Norton, 2011) and other books. Find her at mollystevenscooks.com.