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Squash Sex 101

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A good man was hard to find this morning in the zucchini patch.

It's not that I can't distinguish male and female squashes, which have blossoms of both sexes on the same plant. The huge golden-yellow flowers look similar until you peer inside and find either a female pistil or a column of fused male stamens. But there's a much easier way to tell. Males are attached unceremoniously to long, slender stems. Females have a small bump between stem and flower base, containing the ovary. This bump will become a squash if the flower is pollinated.

I was also there at the right time of day. Squash blossoms open eagerly for the early-rising insects that pollinate them, most notably our native squash bee, so gold trumpets were open wide, as if sounding a mating call. I was on a mission: stuffed squash blossoms for lunch. Why males? Females are just as edible and stuffable. But for maximum squash production I leave the girls alone, along with just enough boys for the bees to gather pollen from and transfer it to the girls.

After hunting through the sprawling, scratchy-leaved vines I headed home with a basket of eight perfect male flowers, enough to feed two, along with bread and a big salad. I checked the petals in case I needed to brush off a bit of soil or knock out a few yellow-and-black-striped cucumber beetles. I trimmed the stems, leaving an inch for a little handle.

Stuffing and frying squash blossoms seems tricky, because they are fragile, but it's easy once you get the knack. I make a slurry of whole-wheat bread flour and water, the consistency of a thin pancake batter. I carefully insert a fat stick of cheese (the size of a finger joint) into each flower, which I dip in the batter. A twirling motion seals the flowers shut, keeping the cheese inside. I quickly fry these dripping packages in hot olive oil, in a cast-iron skillet, flipping them with a spatula so that they turn crisp and golden brown on both sides. The flowers puff slightly like little balloons.

After draining for a minute on paper towels, the blossoms must be eaten right away, with coarse salt and freshly ground pepper, lest they turn soggy. No problem. They are irresistible.

I've tried a number of cheeses with this dish. Soft, mellow ones such as mozzarella, fontina, Havarti or Monterey Jack work best. My current favorite is raclette, but I should retest that assessment, at least once a week.

If male flowers remain scarce, female ones can be used, ovary and all. You'll prevent a few squashes from forming, but at this time in the summer, with zucchini piling up on the kitchen counter, a little squash birth control is a good thing. In case you need an excuse.

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