

Pumpkin—*Cucurbita* spp.¹

James M. Stephens²

The term “pumpkin” refers to certain varieties of *C. pepo* L., *C. moschata* Duch. ex Poir., *C. mixta* Pang., and *C. maxima* Duch. The varieties called pumpkins differ from those varieties called squashes by having coarser, more strongly flavored flesh, and rinds that are softer at maturity than the winter squashes but harder than the summer squashes. Local tradition and common usage may dictate that a particular variety is called a squash in one area of the country and a pumpkin in another.

Description

Pumpkins come in many shapes, sizes, and colors. This variation owes not only to the many named varieties, but also to the fact that pumpkins cross-pollinate readily among themselves and with the squashes. Seeds of pumpkins are commonly saved by gardeners.

Culture

Since most pumpkin varieties need about 3½ to 4 months to mature, they should be seeded by July 4 to be ready for Halloween. Pumpkins planted in the spring (late March and early April) mature in about 100 days and produce best yields. These are harvested in late June and early July and must be stored until used in October and November. Storage is a problem. In a test at Gainesville, FL, storage in a dry unrefrigerated location resulted in 50% loss of pumpkins (‘Big Max,’ ‘Connecticut Field,’ and ‘Funny Face’) by late October.



Figure 1. Pumpkin.
Credits: James M. Stephens, UF/IFAS

Pumpkins seeded from late April through July are affected by virus and fungal diseases, impaired by fruit-set problems, and produce smaller size pumpkins. Early August seeding provides the best fall crop for Thanksgiving, but is usually too late for Halloween.

Most pumpkins, except the bush types, need at least 6 feet in each direction to spread and grow. Plant three to four seeds in a hill, and then remove all but the strongest plant when they reach 2–4 inches tall.

Pumpkins respond well to liberal amounts of organic compost. A good growing tip is to place compost (chicken or cow manure) under each hill before seeding. Mix a handful of 666 fertilizer into each hill when preparing. Sidedress with a handful of 666 every 3 weeks or as needed.

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All pumpkins have both male and female flowers on each plant. Bees are needed to transfer the pollen. When the plant has two small pumpkins about the size of baseballs, remove all others as they form. This allows the two that remain to reach fairly large size.

Use

The most common uses for pumpkins are for jack o'lanterns and making pies. Some of the more widely grown varieties for these purposes are described here.

For Jack O'Lanterns

'Connecticut Field' is the standard general purpose or large Halloween pumpkin that is used more than any other variety for carving into a jack o'lantern. Fruits have a hard orange, smooth, and slightly ribbed skin. Other names sometimes used for this variety are: Big Tom, Canner's Supreme, Common Field, Connecticut Cornfield, Connecticut Golden Field, Connecticut Yellow Field, Eastern Field, Georgia Field, Golden Marrow, Indian Field, Jack O'Lantern, Lake Shore, Large Common Field, Large Cornfield, Mammoth Field, Michigan Mammoth, Pure Gold, Southern Gold, Southern Field, Vermont Pumpkin, Western Field, Yankee, Yankee Field, and Yankee Pie. It is used for making pies, canning, stock feed, and jack o'lanterns.

'Howden' and 'Jackpot' are best for Florida. 'Big Max' is a big pumpkin well-suited for Florida gardens. 'Big Moon' is grown for show and making jack o'lanterns. Some of these may reach 200 pounds under ideal growing conditions. 'Jack O'Lantern' is about the right size for a small jack o'lantern (grows about the size of a man's head). 'Funny Face' is suited to small gardens with its semi-bush plants. 'Spirit' is good for both small jack o'lanterns and pies. Perhaps the top show pumpkin variety is 'Atlantic Giant'. It has been weighed in at over 200 pounds in Florida, and over 800 pounds elsewhere.

For Pie Pumpkins

'Small Sugar,' also known as New England Pie, Boston Pie, Early Sugar, Golden Sugar, Mother's Famous Pie, New England Pie, New Yellow Sweet Potato Pie, and Yum Yum, is the most popular and widely grown pie pumpkin throughout the northeastern section of the country. These round, flattened pumpkins are small, averaging only 6–7 pounds.

Other common varieties of pie pumpkins are 'Cinderella,' 'Triple Treat,' 'Spookie,' 'Winter Luxury,' 'Cheese,' 'Kentucky

Field,' and 'Cushaws.' The Cushaws produce medium-sized elongated fruits, with necks and bulbous ends.

Ornamental Pumpkins

These miniature fruits are 3–4 inches in diameter. Varieties are Munchkin, Sweetie Pie, Bushkin, Minijack, and Jack-Be-Little.

Storage

Pumpkins keep for a few weeks, but long time storage of 1–4 months is very difficult to accomplish in Florida. Where possible, store them in a dry (70% RH) and cool (50°F–60°F) place. Spread out the pumpkins rather than stacking them up. Decay is the main source of loss. Some good results have been obtained by curing pumpkins before storing. This was done by keeping them for 10 days at 80°F–85°F and a high relative humidity (80%–85%).