

Pumpkin

Pumpkin is a summer-growing annual of the genus *Curcubita* and the family Curcubitaceae, which also includes gourds. It is a winter squash recognized by its many creases running from the stem to the bottom on its thick-skinned shell. It is harvested and eaten in the mature fruit stage, when its color has changed from green, usually well into the fall. Pumpkin grows on long vines and comes in many varieties and colors, but we are most familiar with the orange variety. Like other winter squash, it can be stored intact for carving and eating later in the season. Some varieties are preferable for carving, some for making pies. Pumpkin seeds can also be cleaned, dried, and salted for a healthful snack.

Planting:

Plant 2 to 3 seeds every 3 ft. to 4 ft. apart in rows that are about 8 to 12 feet apart after all danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed. Plant the seeds about ½" deep in the soil. Expect germination in 7 to 10 days. You can also plant transplants by sowing seed indoors in 3-inch diameter containers 3 weeks before planting time. Seed or transplants can be planted through black plastic to hasten maturity. After seedlings emerge, pinch out all but the strongest seedling. Handle transplants gently and disturb the root system as little as possible. Thin seedlings by cutting excess plants with scissors rather than by pulling. Although most pumpkins require more than 100 days to ripen, you can still plant a second crop between June 15 and July 1. This crop will be harvested around the time of the first frost. If you have space limitations, you can also grow miniature pumpkins like 'Jack Be Little' or 'Little Boo', or you can grow them on a fence or trellis if you support the fruit as it grows.

Cultivation:

- **Fertilizing** – Fertilize these medium feeders when starting the seeds and then side-dress with ¼ lb. 10-10-10 per 10 feet of row 3 weeks after blossoming begins. Soil containing plenty of compost or well-rotted manure is ideal, but good crops can also grow in average, adequately fertilized soils.

- **Watering** – Water deeply and regularly at the base of each plant, especially during hot, dry weather and once the fruits start to form.
- **Weeding** – Remove all young weed seedlings by hand or with a hoe and use a mulch around plants to keep weed seeds from germinating.

Special directions – Like other members of the squash family, pumpkins will produce male flowers for 1 to 2 weeks before their first female flowers. This is a normal growth habit and varies with cultivars. For a flower to develop into a fruit, pollen must be carried by bees from male flowers, on the same plant or on different plants, to the female flower (the one with the tiny squash). Poor fruit-set is common during rainy weather when bees are inactive. Avoid using pesticides during the bloom period.

Harvesting:

Generally, pumpkins are harvested in late September or October before heavy frosts hit the planting area. Use a sharp knife or pruning shears to cut them from the vines, leaving 3 to 4 inches of stem attached to each fruit. Try to avoid cutting or bruising the fruit. The rinds need to be hard and firm for pumpkins to store well.

Storage and Preservation:

Store pumpkins in a dry area that stays between 50 and 55 degrees F. If they ripen well before Halloween you can wash them with a weak bleach solution (1 TBS. mixed in 16 oz. of water), rinse with water, and store them in your basement on a pallet or platform that allows air to circulate around the fruit.

Nutrition: Source of beta carotene (converts to Vitamin A) & Vitamin C

Preparation & Use: Choose pumpkins that are heavy for their size. Most often used cooked to make pie filling but can also be substituted in recipes calling for winter squash.

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