

Growing a variety of pumpkins

Question: What is the difference between growing jack-o'-lantern pumpkins and pie pumpkins? I know now is the time to start my pumpkin plants for fall harvest, so can you give me some recommendations?

Answer: Pumpkins (*Cucurbita pepa*) are a member of the Cucurbitaceae family, and figure greatly in the world's food basket.

Cucurbitaceae is the family that includes squashes, melons, cucumbers and the like. Cucurbits are native to both the old and new worlds – squashes and pumpkins from the western hemisphere and melons and cucumbers from the eastern hemisphere.

Archaeological investigations have found evidence of domestication of *Cucurbita* going back over 8,000 years from the very southern parts of Canada down to Argentina and Chile.

Pumpkins (along with other forms of squash) were a historically important food staple among Native Americans. The word "pumpkin" originates from the Greek word for large melon, "pepon." Americans later changed it to "pumpkin," the name we still use today.

Pie pumpkins are used for cooking and baking, and are also called sugar pumpkins. Although they make adorable front porch décor, they are best when roasted in the oven and baked into your favorite fall desserts.

Sugar pumpkins are denser and contain less water than carving pumpkins, making them better for baking. Carving pumpkins have a much thinner outer shell and less flesh on the inside. That makes them easier to carve to create all sorts of fun and spooky designs.

You'll also notice that carving pumpkins are stringier than pie pumpkins and contain more water, which makes them less ideal for creating sweet treats. If you're thinking of using the same pumpkins intended for carving to make a pie, you're entering into a trap. Not all pumpkins are created equal!

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PHOTO BY CHRIS RUSCH

Pumpkins are annual vines that like warmth, and need a lot of space. Start your plants in early April in a green house or cold frame for transplanting in May.



Chris Rusch
Ask a Master Gardener

lot of space. Start your plants in early April in a green house or cold frame for transplanting in May. Pumpkins are sensitive to the cold. They should not be planted until all danger of frost has passed and the soil is above 65 degrees.

Pumpkins are big, greedy feeders and love fertile soil. Before planting, spade the soil about a foot deep and mix in some compost, manure and well-balanced fertilizer. Mound up the soil in this area and plant your strongest looking pumpkin in the middle.

Keep the soil moist but not wet. Too much water will slow plant growth and encourage fungal diseases. Water deeply

and regularly at the base of each plant, especially during hot weather and once the fruits start to form. Time your watering so the leaves have time to dry before dusk. This will reduce disease problems.

Remove all young moisture and nutrient-robbing weeds by hand or with a hoe. The goal is to maximize the amount of sunlight received by the leaves as well as the amount of water and nutrients available to the roots. Add mulch around your pumpkin to keep in moisture, suppress weeds and discourage pests.

Pumpkin vines are very delicate. Take care not to damage the vines as this can reduce the quality of the fruit.

Like other members of the squash family, pumpkins produce separate male and female flowers. Male flowers usually appear first. This is a normal growth habit and varies with cultivars. For a flower to develop into a fruit, pollen must

be carried by insects from the male flower, on the same plant or different plants, to the female flower. Poor fruit set is common during rainy weather when bees are inactive.

Your pumpkins should be ready for harvest in mid-September. Harvest your pumpkins on a dry day after the plants have died back. A pumpkin is ripe when its skin turns a deep orange color and the stem hardens. Leave two to three inches of stem on your pumpkin when harvesting for the best storage.

To toughen the skin and intensify the flavor, cure pumpkins in a sunny spot for a week or two. After curing, store your pumpkin in a cool dry room or root cellar.

When it comes to choosing a pumpkin variety, think about what you want to do with it. Here are some recommendations:

■ The best pumpkins to grow for pies include: Small

Sugar, Sugar Treat, and Winter Luxury. These varieties all have outstanding flavor and bright orange flesh.

■ The best pumpkins to grow for carving include: Autumn Gold, Magic Lantern, Spartan, and Howden.

■ The best pumpkins to grow for their giant size and prize-winning include: Dills Atlantic Giant, Big Max, and Big Moose.

Whether you use them for cooking or carving or largest pumpkin competitions, growing your own pumpkins will not disappoint!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.