



The Nature of Halloween: Great Pumpkins

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<http://images.google.com/images?hl=en&um=1&q=pumpkin+varieties+photos&sa=N&start=40&ndsp=20>

Pumpkins are Pumpkins, Right?

Pumpkins are more than just pretty fruits from the field. They are the material of legends, nutritious and tasty foods, and the objects of many fierce competitions for size and utility. Pumpkins are not just for Halloween anymore.

Are pumpkins vegetables? The answer is no. Pumpkins, like other fruits, contain seeds encased in a sweet vessel. When an animal eats pumpkins, or apples or berries, they eat the meat of the fruit, but they also eat the seeds. When the animal walks or flies away, it carries the seeds to other areas and eventually drops them when the animal defecates. Fruit plants can make use of animals to distribute their seeds, and the seeds are automatically given a nice dose of nutrient-rich manure to grow in when they sprout.

Pumpkins are a native fruit of the Americas. Native Americans have cultivated pumpkins for about 5,000 years, often in a three sisters garden composed of pumpkins, corn, and beans. The word pumpkin supposedly came about in 1584 when French explorer Jacques Cartier believed they were big melons, or pompons. This word was later translated into English as pompions and ultimately pumpkins. People living in British countries refer to all squashes as pumpkins, whereas North Americans generally refer only to the rounder, orange varieties of squash as pumpkins.

Super Pumpkins and World Records

Contests for pumpkin size exist around the world. Cultivators are always looking for a secret edge to grow humongous pumpkins. Having the county or state record for heaviest pumpkin is a great bragging point. The current world record for giant pumpkin was set Oct. 3, 2009 in Ohio. Christy Harp, a school teacher, brought in a pumpkin weighing 1725 pounds. Will anyone break the 2000 pound barrier? Check out your local county fair for local winners and news about any new world records.



www.bigpumpkins.com



Stephen Clarke of Orlando, Florida currently holds the world record for fastest pumpkin carving. He took just 24.03 seconds to carve a face into his contest pumpkin in 2006. Specific information about how complicated his carving was or how thick his pumpkin was could not be obtained. It is safe to say, however, that his knife was really sharp and he probably was not sneaking any Halloween candy on the side.

http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records/amazing_feats/unusual_skills/pumpkin_carving_-_fastest_time.aspx

Keene, NH is home to the Keene Pumpkin Festival each October. Until 2006, Keene held the world record for the greatest number of lit jack o'lanterns, 28,952. The current record of 30,128 was set in 2006 by Boston during its pumpkin festival to support a camp for children with life-threatening diseases. Keene stands ready to reclaim its title, but fair weather always helps. Even though New Hampshire folks can get scared away by heavy rain or cold winds. The total number of pumpkins for 2009 was 29,068, a good showing, but not quite enough to break the record. Better luck next year!



http://keenesentinel.com/content/gallery/gallery_2/album_4/midsize_photo4aae5ec174341018701204.jpg

Beyond the Inside Scoop

Pumpkins were not traditionally used by the early celebrants of Halloween (the Celtic people of Ireland and Scotland), because they did not have pumpkins. Early jack o'lanterns were made using turnips or potatoes. As people from these places began to call America home, they made use of the local fruit, pumpkins, for their jack o'lanterns.



<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://cache.boston.com>

Pumpkins are fun to grow, carve, and decorate, but pumpkins are also fun to break. Halloween tricksters have long known how nicely pumpkins smash, but physics students are also learning that pumpkins can be used as projectiles to test catapults or other devices. Science teachers have used pumpkins for many years to teach students about the physics of target practice. A large medieval catapult is set up in an agricultural field and students are given the task of hitting a target. Students learn about mass, velocity, arcs, projectile qualities, and the effects of wind.

Most of us know what happens to pumpkins of normal size, but what happens to the giant pumpkins entered into county fairs after fair season is over? Not many people use those pumpkins for jack o'lanterns, but some folks around the US have recently started a new tradition of hollowing out the giant pumpkins, attaching a small outboard motor or oarlocks, climbing in, and using them as

boats. Pumpkin boat races are becoming popular autumn events. Cinderella's giant pumpkin carriage may not be such a far-fetched idea, after all. Maybe next year someone will attach wheels and hold a giant pumpkin derby down a sloped road or a ski/sled trail!



www.zegarkus.com

Growing and Eating Pumpkins

With the increased demand for giant pumpkins, how does one grow such a monster? The details are many, but giant pumpkins do not grow merely by chance or luck. All giant pumpkins start with a Giant Atlantic Pumpkin seed. (Only giant pumpkins beget giant pumpkins.) The seed must be started early for a head-start on the growing season. The soil must have the right combination of nutrients, pH, moisture, sun, and shade. The seed must be planted at a certain depth and then more soil must be added to make the roots more rigorous. Pollination must occur in a specific window of time. Only the best female flowers should be pollinated. The plant must put all its energy into one pumpkin, so only one fruit can be allowed to grow. The stem angle must be monitored and the pumpkin vine must be trained to leave room for the growing pumpkin. Of course, despite careful attention to details, the weather plays a big role in determining how big a pumpkin grows. The biggest pumpkins require attention to detail and a good bit of luck.

Pumpkins are fun, but they are also an excellent and easy-to-grow source of food. The meat of a pumpkin is high in Vitamin A, Vitamin B (niacin), potassium, protein, fiber, iron, and zinc. Pumpkin seeds, also called pepitas, are also very nutritious. The seeds have lots of magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, zinc, and protein. They may help the body minimize arthritis, they appear to promote prostate health, and they are believed to help reduce cholesterol levels in blood.

Trick of Treat

Whether or not one believes in the Great Pumpkin, pumpkins are great and worth celebrating. Have a Happy Halloween from the folks at the Lamprey River Advisory Committee!

For more information on pumpkins, please look to these articles that were used for this piece:

www.backyardgardener.com/secert.html

www.history.com/content/halloween/jthe-jack-o-lantern

www.pumpkinook.com/giants/giantpumpkins.htm

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/pumpkins/nutrition.cfm>

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pumpkin_Fest

www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?friendly=1&tname=foodspice&dbid=82