

Pumpkins: More Than Just Jack-o'-Lanterns

With Halloween close by, pumpkins are showing up everywhere—from store displays to front-yard décor. Even though it's easy to grab one from a local grocery store, pumpkins have a long and fascinating history that often goes unnoticed.

A Botanical Background

Botanically, pumpkins are types of winter squash, which means they can be stored for months after harvest. There isn't just one species of squash that produces pumpkins. Instead, pumpkins come from three or four related squash species that have been selected and bred over centuries to have similar-looking fruit. These species are often interbred to develop new pumpkin and squash varieties.

An Ancient North American Crop

Pumpkins are native to North America and rank among the oldest cultivated crops in the world. Archaeological evidence shows they were grown as far back as 7,500 years ago. Indigenous peoples ate pumpkin flesh fresh, dried it for later use, and ground it into flour for breads and soups. The flowers and young leaves were also used as food.

When Europeans arrived, they found pumpkins being grown by many tribes across the continent. They quickly adopted the crop themselves, and pumpkins spread from North America to the rest of the world. Today, pumpkin varieties are found globally and are used mostly for cooking. Interestingly, China now grows more pumpkins than any other country. While carving Jack-o'-Lanterns is a popular North American tradition—now spreading to the United Kingdom—it is not widely practiced elsewhere.

Cooking vs. Carving

We all love pumpkin pie, but Jack-o'-Lantern pumpkins aren't the best choice for baking. Their flesh is fibrous, stringy, and watery, and the flavor is mild. If you try cooking them, you'll need to remove the strings, drain the water, and add sweetener and spices to improve taste. Instead, canned pumpkin and pie pumpkins (sometimes called "sugar pumpkins") come from varieties bred specifically for cooking, with dense, smooth, and flavorful flesh.

Nutrition and Sustainability

Like other winter squash, pumpkins are packed with nutrients. They're rich in vitamin A, beta-carotene, and vitamin C, and they provide a good amount of dietary fiber. After the season ends, pumpkins grown on farms rarely go to waste—livestock such as cows and pigs love them. Many farmers feed leftover pumpkins to their animals, either by turning livestock into fields or collecting the fruit for feed.

Varieties to Try Next Year

Jack-o-Lantern pumpkins are a very popular garden crop. Popular heirloom varieties include Connecticut Field, which was a Native American type, and Howden. Howden was developed as an “improved” Connecticut Field, producing fruit that is slightly more consistently sized and a bit larger. It is also somewhat more productive. If you're willing to put in the effort, both varieties are open-pollinated and will come back true to type, but you need to learn how to do that. Other Jack-o-Lantern types include Mustang and Cronus. Many more exist.

If you want the biggest pumpkin, try Big Max or Dill's Atlantic Giant. Atlantic Giant holds the current world record for the largest pumpkin ever grown, weighing over 1,300 pounds. For cooking pumpkins, look for “sugar” types. They do not have strings, are less fibrous, and pack more flavor and sweetness. For pies, look for Sugar Pie, Baby Pam, or Autumn Gold. Cinderella, Fairytale, Lumina, Jarrahdale, and Long Island Cheese are all great for soups and desserts.