Pumpkins play a big part in the fall holiday season. We decorate our yards with them, carve them into jack-o'-lanterns, and even eat them. To most people, a pumpkin is simply a pumpkin. However, depending on how they are used, pumpkins come in a surprising variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and types.

Pumpkins are actually types of winter squash in the genus *Cucurbita* and are closely related to, or even the same species as, other winter squash such as butternut, acorn, and spaghetti squash. They are native to the Americas, where Indigenous peoples cultivated them thousands of years before European settlers arrived. Europeans eventually brought pumpkins and other squash back to Europe, where they became important food crops.

The tradition of carving jack-o'-lanterns originated in the British Isles, particularly Ireland and Scotland, where people traditionally carved turnips and other root vegetables. Immigrants brought this practice to North America, where pumpkins became popular for carving because they were larger and easier to hollow out.

Pumpkins and other winter squash originated in different regions of North, Central, and South America. Over thousands of years, people selectively bred them for desirable characteristics such as size, shape, color, flavor, and storage ability. Varieties within the same species also cross readily, allowing breeders to develop new forms. As a result, what we commonly call pumpkins can belong to as many as five cultivated species of *Cucurbita*, although most familiar varieties belong to just three.

One thing most people do not realize is that the pumpkin in commercially processed pumpkin puree often comes from a different species than the pumpkins we carve for Halloween. Most commercially processed pumpkin comes from *Cucurbita moschata*, the same species as butternut squash. These varieties have been selected for their flavorful, smooth-textured flesh that is well suited for pies, breads, and other desserts. In contrast, traditional jack-o'-lantern pumpkins, which are generally *Cucurbita pepo*, have been bred primarily for their size, shape, and ease of carving. Although edible, their flesh tends to be more fibrous, less flavorful, and watery when cooked.

If you want to grow your own pumpkins and are looking for varieties useful for both carving and baking, 'Connecticut Field', 'Spookie', and 'Small Sugar' (also called 'New England Pie') are a few options. 'Howden', 'Magic Lantern', 'Ghost Rider', 'Mustang', and 'Gladiator' are examples of varieties grown primarily for jack-o'-lanterns.

'Connecticut Field' and 'Howden' are both open-pollinated varieties, meaning you can save their seeds to grow similar pumpkins in future years. However, pumpkins readily cross with other varieties of the same species, including some summer and winter squash. To keep seeds true to type, flowers must be isolated from unwanted pollen and carefully hand-pollinated.

Seeds saved from hybrid pumpkins can also be planted, but the resulting pumpkins may differ from their parents in size, shape, color, and other characteristics. This does not necessarily mean they will be unsuitable for carving. I have planted seeds from hybrid pumpkins and found that the next generation produced perfectly acceptable jack-o'-lanterns. In fact, volunteer pumpkins have germinated in my garden for several years, and many have been just fine for carving. However, pumpkins grown from seeds of unknown parentage should not be eaten if their flesh tastes unusually bitter.

Finally, when carving pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns, there are several things you can do to help them last longer. Start by selecting pumpkins free of wounds, bruises, and soft spots. Wash and dry them before carving, and use clean carving tools. Avoid using candles to light them. Besides being a fire hazard, candle heat can damage the pumpkin's flesh and speed up rotting. Battery-operated LED lights are a better option.

One trick I learned while helping prepare pumpkins for public pumpkin walks is that organizers sometimes spray freshly carved pumpkins with Lysol-type disinfectants to slow decay. These products can reduce microorganisms that cause rotting, potentially extending a carved pumpkin's life by several days or longer. In my experience, treated pumpkins have sometimes lasted up to an additional week. You may repeat the treatment as needed, if the product label permits it. However, never eat pumpkins treated with household disinfectants or feed them to livestock.