



Harvest of the Month

Pumpkins



Social Science

Pumpkins belong to a group of plants that is among the oldest (if not the oldest) domesticated species. The oldest known locations of cultivation are in southern Mexico in Oaxaca 8,000–10,000 years ago, and Ocampo, Tamaulipas, Mexico about 7,000 years ago. Before the arrival of Europeans, pumpkins had been carried to all parts of North America where they could be grown. The ancient territory extended north into Texas and up the Greater Mississippi River Valley into Illinois and east to Florida, and possibly even to Maine. It is one of only a few plants cultivated in prehistoric North America as far back as 4,000 years ago.

Jack-o'-lanterns carved from pumpkins are a yearly Halloween tradition that developed in the United States when Celtic influenced immigrants brought their root vegetable carving traditions with them. Pumpkins were more accessible and more easily carved than the traditional giant turnips that were used in the ancient festivals of Ireland and Britain. Today, Fall pumpkin patches can be found in every U.S. state. Illinois grows the most pumpkins; but they are not used for carving, most are processed into canned pumpkin and other commercial products.

Calabaza means pumpkin in Spanish.

Botany

Pumpkins belong to the family *Cucurbitaceae* which includes a lot of common garden crops: all the squashes, zucchini, cucumbers, melons and watermelons. Pumpkins are scientifically classified as *Cucurbita pepo* and their closest relatives are the Summer squashes, spaghetti acorn, and delicata winter squashes. Pumpkins are a type of Winter squash because they have thick walls that allow them to be stored well past their harvest time in the Fall and eaten during the Winter.



Nutrition

Pumpkins are rich in nutrients, fiber, and antioxidants. They are high in Vitamin A, Vitamin K, Copper, Vitamin E, Iron and Magnesium. They also have decent amounts of riboflavin, Vitamin B6, Vitamin C and Potassium. Pumpkin seeds are a high fat, low carbohydrate snack rich in Copper, Magnesium, Phosphorus and Zinc.

Fun Fact:

Did you know there is a difference between pie pumpkins and carving pumpkins? Carving pumpkins are bred to have thin walls and thin, stringy flesh to make cutting and cleaning easier. Pumpkins bred for eating have thick, smooth, sweet flesh. Pie pumpkins will also be small and heavy for their size. Carving pumpkins come in all shapes and sizes.

Growing Tips

Pumpkins can be a bit tricky to grow in school gardens because the planting and harvesting window fall very tightly with the end and beginning of the school year. However, if you can plant your pumpkin seeds at the very end of the school year in the Spring, you will have pumpkins ready to harvest in the first half of September. Or, if you can get back to campus to plant around the Summer solstice, your pumpkins will be ready to harvest during the first couple weeks of October.

Planting & Care

Variety selection is very important, because some pumpkin varieties can take up to 12 sq. ft. of space or more! There are bush varieties, however, that will need only about 4 sq. ft. of space. If you have the space in your school garden, there is nothing kids love more than a pumpkin patch. Pumpkins are easy to grow from seed. The seeds are quite large and germinate quickly if the soil is warm.

To grow, make sure your soil is loose and fertile, with good moisture holding capacity. Water consistently while the plants are young and fruit set is happening. Water can then be slowly cut back in late Summer as the fruit is ripening.

Harvest

Make sure the pumpkins are fully ripe before harvesting, with good color and stems that are turning from green to brown. Cut the fruits from the vine with at least a couple of inches of stem still attached.

Culinary Uses

Pumpkin seeds are edible and delicious! While all pumpkin seeds can be eaten, if you are serious about eating these choose varieties that have hullless seeds to make the eating experience a little more enjoyable. These are known as “pepitas”. Pumpkin seeds with hulls are higher in fiber, but a lot more chewy because of it. If roasted, that chewiness becomes crunchiness.

