



It's time to decorate for the season. Pumpkins, squash and gourds are now readily available for the season's décor. On Sunday, September 22nd, the first day of fall, Rita and I collected an assortment of all three and now have them strategically placed on our front steps creating an

autumn scene. While gathering these items, she and I entered into a lengthy discussion as to their differences. Reflecting back, I'm not sure if we resolved the issue.

Over the years, I've discovered considerable confusion exists when trying to distinguish one from the other. One simple, non-scientific definition I've heard is pumpkins are something you carve, squash are something you cook and eat, and gourds are something you look at but don't eat. The fact is the genetic history of these three items is so intertwined that it's extremely difficult to tell them apart. All three are fruits of herbaceous vining plants that seem to possess more similarities than differences.



They all belong in the same plant family *Cucurbitaceae*. Interestingly, this plant family also includes melons and cucumbers. The family *Cucurbitaceae* is sub-divided into 125 genera. One genus out of this 125 is called *Cucurbita*. In the Latin language, *Cucurbita* is the word for gourd. The genus *Cucurbita* includes an assortment of pumpkins and squash as well as a few gourds. How's that for a bewildering explanation? Adding to the confusion, the words squash,

pumpkin and gourd are often used interchangeably-depending on the variety and local customs. The sole exception is the decorative or Halloween Jack-o-Lantern pumpkin which is always called a pumpkin and not a squash or a gourd.

To be more definitive, let's look closely at three different species within this genus: *Cucurbita pepo*, *Cucurbita maxima* and *Cucurbita moschata*, and one other genus/species *Lagenaria siceraria*.

Those recognized as true pumpkins (including the Jack-o-lantern) belong to the *Cucurbita pepo* species. Varieties in this group have distinctly furrowed woody stems and yellow flowers. The skin of the fruit is hard and usually bright orange. Most pumpkins, acorn squash, summer squash and courgette (zucchini) belong to the *C.pepo* species. There are even some smaller varieties in this species that are referred to only as gourds.

The *maxima* species is slightly different from the *pepo* in that it is less hardy and has a softer, spongy stem. The skin is yellow rather than orange. The *maxima* species is frequently branded as a squash-type pumpkin or pumpkin-squash. They include winter squashes such as the banana squash and the buttercup squash.

Cucurbita moschata cultivars are generally more tolerant of hot, humid weather than cultivars of *C. maxima* or *C. pepo*. Butternut squash is an example of this species.

Most of what we refer to as gourds belongs to *Lagenaria siceraria*. Blooming vines of this species have white flowers. They are usually grown for their utilitarian and ornamental value and not as food. Normally they are inedible due to an offensive smell or bad taste. There are hard-shell gourds such as the birdhouse and bottle gourds, and there are soft-shell gourds that



look similar to squash.

Now that I've filled your head with all this confusing scientific information, I have a hunch you still aren't sure what the difference is among pumpkins, squash and gourds. If it's any consolation, I remain somewhat confused myself. Perhaps clinging to the simple definition that pumpkins are for carving, squash are for cooking and eating and gourds are for looking at is all we really need to know. Furthermore, one can use all three for autumn decorating.