

October is synonymous with fall, Halloween, and pumpkins. Last weekend, I had the very cool opportunity to go to Autumn at the Arboretum hosted by the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Gardens. It has more than 90,000 pumpkins and gourds scattered throughout the gardens and lining the pathways, as well as piles of pumpkins and gourds like the ones pictured. It got me thinking about why pumpkins are associated with Halloween, and where they come from.

Pumpkins are native to the Americas, and were grown by Native Americans as part of the three sisters gardening technique. The three so-called sisters were corn, pole beans, and pumpkins or squash. This arrangement worked well because the corn would serve as a pole for the beans to climb, while the beans stabilize the corn. The beans are also legumes, meaning that their roots put nitrogen back into the soil. Now, anyone that has ever grown a cucurbit such as pumpkins or cucumbers can tell you that they spread fast and make a great ground cover. Because they are so thick, they assist in keeping the weed population down, and prevent moisture evaporation from the soil. The Native Americans showed the colonists this technique, aiding in their survival.

Despite pumpkins being native to America, Jack o'lanterns are actually a result of an Irish myth about a man named Jack. Jack tricked the devil into promising that he wouldn't take Jack's soul, but when Jack died, he was denied access into heaven. Jack was sent into the night with only a burning coal to light his path. This burning coal was put into a carved potato, turnip, or beet, depending on which version of the story you read. The children would then commemorate this man each year. It is also said that they would carve scary faces into their vegetables in order to scare away Jack and other evil spirits. Much later it was found that pumpkins worked much better for carving than potatoes or turnips, and our modern day Jack o'lantern was created.

To pick the perfect pumpkin, either for scaring away spirits or for making pie, there are a few guidelines. Pumpkins should be heavy and not have any soft spots. Avoid any with nicks, blemishes, or chew marks in the skin, as this can make them rot faster than they would normally. Pumpkins should also still have their stems attached. Pumpkins that are used for Jack o'lanterns are edible, but there are specific varieties of pumpkins that are grown specially to be made into pie. They tend to be sweeter and have a different texture than that of regular pumpkins. Beyond those guidelines for choosing a pumpkin, the sky is the limit. There are so many different varieties that you are bound to find one that you like. Personally, I like the "Crown of Thorns" variety of pumpkins. They form tentacle like growths on the bottom half of the pumpkin, creating an octopus appearance. Pumpkins come in just about any color from green to orange to blue, and many different shapes. So maybe this year you could try something new and instead of going with a standard orange pumpkin, try carving a white pumpkin instead.

Pumpkins have been grown in America for hundreds of years. First by the Native Americans, then the colonists, and now us. The myth that eventually caused Jack o'lanterns may have started in Ireland, but carving pumpkins is now firmly rooted here, even if we aren't quite as concerned about scaring away evil spirits. Jack o'lanterns are classically orange, but there are as many different color and shape combinations of pumpkins as you can imagine. Happy Halloween everyone! If you have any questions feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu

If you enjoy my column, like gardening, or learning about plants, I'd like to invite you to an informational meeting for the Extension Master Gardener program on November 10 from 2-3 at the Buffalo County Extension building. The Master Gardener program is a volunteer program that helps educate the public about Horticulture, and make a difference through the volunteer hours they put in. Come learn more about the program and be able to ask questions! Please RSVP through the contact information listed above. See you soon!

-Miranda

