



2019- The Year of Pumpkin

Earlier this spring, we looked at three ornamental plants promoted this year by the National Garden Bureau – *dahlia*, *snapdragon* and *Salvia nemorosa*. It's getting warm enough now (at least most days!) that we can begin planting their final "Year of the..." feature – pumpkin. Pumpkins are a fun plant to grow, especially when gardening with children, with many uniquely colored or shaped cultivars from which to choose.

What is a Pumpkin?

Pumpkins are members of the Cucurbitaceae, or cucumber, family and are related to squash, zucchini, cucumbers and melons. Most pumpkins belong to the species *Cucurbita pepo*, which also includes varieties of winter squash, summer squash, zucchini, and gourds. These pumpkins are characterized by round fruit with a thick shell that has smooth, slightly ribbed skin and a deep yellow to orange color.

However, some winter squash varieties from the species *Cucurbita maxima* (Jarrahdale¹, Turk's Turban², and all giant pumpkins³) and *Cucurbita moschata* (Long Island Cheese¹, Rouge Vif D'Etampes²) are sometimes also considered pumpkins due to their similar appearance.

Diversity among pumpkin varieties is incredible! With sizes ranging from 4 ounces to over 1,000 pounds, various unique shapes, and brilliant colors like orange, yellow, white, green, blue, gray, pink, and tan, there are endless opportunities to select the perfect pumpkin.

Choosing the Perfect Pumpkin

When selecting a pumpkin for cooking, it is best to choose a "pie pumpkin" which has dense, sweet flesh. *Pik-A-Pie*⁴ is a go-to favorite! The sugars and lower moisture of these types hold up best in cooking. It is also easy to grow pumpkins for harvesting edible seeds. To save time, choose a naked-seeded (hull-less or semi hull-less) pumpkin with seeds that do not need to be hulled before eating. The variety *Naked Bear*⁵ is an excellent all-around choice for cooking, edible seeds, and making pumpkin seed oil. *Pepitas*⁶, an All-American Selection (AAS) Winner, has a strong handle, beautiful golden orange rinds with dark green streaks. The pumpkin is delicious, with nutritious flesh and bountiful "naked" tender, succulent, nutty seeds for roasting!

When selecting pumpkins for carving and fall decoration, choose varieties that suit your style! Traditional carving pumpkins are medium to large in size, deep orange, and lightly ribbed with a strong handle. Some standards are Gladiator¹, Magic Lantern⁷, and Howden³. If you'd like to get creative with your carving, try a warted (Warty Goblin¹), yellow (Mellow Yellow²), or white pumpkin (Lumina⁸ or Super Moon⁵, an AAS winner).

For painting, look for a small pumpkin with a strong handle and a smooth surface, such as Hijinks⁹ (AAS winner).

Add additional interest to fall décor using miniature pumpkins with unique colors and patterns. Miniature pumpkins are typically less than 2 pounds and can be found in a variety of shapes and colors; Hooligan¹, Baby Boo³, Jack Be Little¹⁰ and Wee-B-Little¹¹ (AAS winner) are favorites that can add a perfect pop of color.

Growing Pumpkins

Mid-May to mid-June, after all risk of frost has passed, is a good time for pumpkin planting in Nebraska. Seeds can be direct sown or started indoors and should be planted at a depth of 1" into well-drained soil that has warmed to 70°F. To ensure fruit set and yields, allow sufficient space between each plant. Give small pumpkins a 12 ft. area, large pumpkins a 24 ft. area, and giant pumpkins a 36-48 ft. area per plant.

Pumpkins perform best when they are fertilized throughout the growing season and fruit set will be strongest if the flowers are pollinated by bees. If pumpkin flowers are not pollinated completely, the fruit will start growing but will abort before full development. To ensure a bountiful pumpkin harvest, encourage bees in your garden or pollinate the flowers by hand.

When the pumpkins have matured, the stem holding the fruit will begin to dry. Harvest the pumpkin by carefully cutting the vine on each side of the fruit stem, leaving a nub at the point where the stem meets the vine. This will encourage the stem to maintain strength as it dries down and will minimize infection by microbes that can cause decay.

To keep longer-lasting pumpkins, wash the fruits in a diluted bleach solution, allow them to dry, and place them in a cool shady spot after harvest. Then they'll be ready to carve, decorate, or use in the kitchen.

As pumpkins grow in the garden it is incredible to observe the changes throughout the season, and rewarding to finish with a harvest of beautiful, versatile fruits. The uses of pumpkins in the garden and kitchen are limitless, so let your creativity bloom!

Seeds for the pumpkin cultivars mentioned above are available from the following companies.

1. Harris Seeds/Garden Trends, gardentrends.com
2. Johnny's Seeds, johnnyseeds.com
3. Jung Seeds, jungseeds.com
4. Reimer's Seeds, reimerseeds.com
5. West Coast Seeds, westcoastseeds.com
6. Willhite Seed Inc., willhiteseed.com
7. Territorial Seed Company, territorialseed.com
8. Burpee, burpee.com
9. Park Seed, parkseed.com
10. Botanical Interests, botanicalinterests.com
11. Bonnie Plants, bonnieplants.com

For more information on this year's featured plants, visit the National Garden Bureau. www.ngb.org. The National Garden Bureau recognizes and thanks Garden Trends/Harris Seeds as author and contributor to this fact sheet.

Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail sarah.browning@unl.edu.



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