

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Pumpkin



A pumpkin is a cultivar of winter squash that is round with smooth, slightly ribbed skin, and is most often deep yellow to orange in coloration. The thick shell contains the seeds and pulp.

Native to North America (north-eastern Mexico and the southern United States), pumpkins are one of the oldest domesticated plants, having been used as early as 7,000 to 5,500 BC.

The English word pumpkin is derived from the Ancient Greek *pepon* meaning 'melon'. 17th-century English colonists first encountered pumpkins upon their arrival in what is now the north-eastern United States.

The term pumpkin has no agreed botanical or scientific meaning and is used interchangeably with squash and winter squash.

Pumpkins, like other squash, originated in north-eastern Mexico and southern United States. The oldest evidence were pumpkin fragments dated between 7,000 and 5,500 BC found in Mexico. Pumpkin fruits are a type of botanical berry known as a *pepo*.

The colour of pumpkins derives from orange carotenoid pigments.

Giant pumpkins are large squash with a pumpkin-like appearance that grow to exceptional size, with the largest exceeding 1 ton in weight. In 2019, world

production of pumpkins (including squash and gourds) was 23 million tonnes, with China accounting for 37% of the total. Ukraine and Russia each produced about one million tonnes.

Pumpkins produce both a male and female flower, with fertilisation usually effected by bees. In America, pumpkins have historically been pollinated by the native squash bee, however the bee has declined, probably partly due to pesticides but today most commercial plantings are pollinated by hives of honeybees, which also allows the production and sale of honey that the bees produce from the pumpkin pollen.

If there are inadequate bees for pollination, gardeners often have to hand pollinate. Inadequately pollinated pumpkins usually start growing but fail to develop.

Pumpkins are very versatile in their uses for cooking. Most parts of the pumpkin are edible, including the fleshy shell, the seeds, the leaves, and even the flowers. In the United States and Canada, pumpkin is a popular Halloween and Thanksgiving staple. Pumpkin purée is sometimes prepared and frozen for later use.

Pumpkin leaves are usually eaten as a vegetable in Korean cuisine.

Pumpkins have been used as folk medicine by Native Americans to treat intestinal worms and urinary ailments. This Native American remedy was adopted by American doctors in the early nineteenth century for the expulsion of worms.

In Germany and south-eastern Europe, seeds of *C. pepo* were also used as folk remedies to treat irritable bladder, in China seeds were also used in traditional Chinese medicine for the treatment of the parasitic diseases and for the expulsion of tape worms.

Pumpkins are commonly carved into decorative lanterns called jack-o'-lanterns for the Halloween season. Traditionally Britain and Ireland would carve lanterns from vegetables, particularly the turnip, mangelwurzel, or swede. They continue to be popular choices today as carved lanterns in Scotland and Northern Ireland, although the British purchased a million pumpkins for Halloween in 2004.

The practice of carving pumpkins for Halloween originated from an Irish myth about a man named *Stingy Jack*. The turnip has traditionally been used in Ireland and Scotland at Halloween but immigrants to North America used the native pumpkin, which are both readily available and much larger making them easier to carve than turnips.

Not until 1837 does jack-o'-lantern appear as a term for a carved vegetable lantern, and the carved pumpkin lantern association with Halloween is recorded in 1866.

In the United States, the carved pumpkin was first associated with the harvest season in general, long before it became an emblem of Halloween. In 1900, an article on Thanksgiving entertaining recommended a lit jack-o'-lantern as part of the festivities that encourage kids and families to join together to make their own jack-o'-lanterns.

Growers of giant pumpkins often compete to see whose pumpkins are the most massive. Festivals are often dedicated to the pumpkin and these competitions. The record for the world's heaviest pumpkin, 1,190.5 kg (2,624.6 lb), was established in Belgium in 2016.

There is a connection in folklore and popular culture between pumpkins and the supernatural, such as:

- The custom of carving jack-o-lanterns from pumpkins derives from folklore about a lost soul wandering the earth.
- In the fairy tale Cinderella, the fairy godmother turns a pumpkin into a carriage for the title character, but at midnight it reverts to a pumpkin.
- In some adaptations of Washington Irving's ghost story, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, the headless horseman is said to use a pumpkin as a substitute head.