



Pumpkins

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Other than puppies and small children, nothing creates joy quite like the appearance of pumpkins growing in the garden.

And with care in seed choice and cultivation these magnificent fruits will find a home in most garden schemes.

Pumpkin varieties -- part of the Cucurbita family, whose members include cucumbers, squash, muskmelons and watermelons -- range in size from the mini 'Baby Boos' to the beast of the patch, the 'Atlantic Giant.'

Along with size, consider color, texture, shape and growth habit of the pumpkins you plant. If space is tight, the best choice might be a semi-bush variety such as 'Harvest Moon' or the miniature 'Jack-B-Little' that grows up a trellis or on a tomato cage. For unique color there's pure white 'Lumina' or 'Jarrahdale Blue.' And for surprising beauty, try Cinderella 'Rouge Vif d'Etampes.' Local stores and nurseries carry quite a selection, but if you don't find exactly what you want, search the Internet for seed vendors and catalogs.

Pumpkin patch location is critical in growing healthy, beautiful fruits. In selecting a spot for this year's crop, remember pumpkins thrive in full sun and fertile soil with plenty of water and enough elbow room for good air circulation.

Pumpkins favor good soil texture that allows even distribution of water. In preparing the bed, work 1 1/4 inches of organic matter into the top 4 inches of soil. Consider using garden compost, aged manures and coarse sphagnum peat. Avoid "native" sedge peats, as they are too fine in texture and act as a glue thus increasing soil compactness.

To warm the soil, cover the planting area with black plastic. When daytime temperatures are consistently above 55 degrees, remove the plastic and sow seeds directly or transplant seedlings. Direct seeding is reported to give higher yields. If using transplants, they should be small, never more than 2 to 4 weeks old, and when planting take care not to disturb the root system. For pumpkins to mature, seeds need to be planted in the garden by mid-June. Some varieties should be planted earlier.

If you have the time to germinate seeds indoors, use either peat pots or compressed peat pellets. Seedlings started in these containers seem to transplant with minimal shock. It takes about two weeks for pumpkins seeded indoors to be ready for transplanting. Remember to harden off the seedlings for 2 to 3 days before planting them outdoors. Do this by placing them outside in a protected location out of direct sunlight. Plant the entire peat pot deep enough for the soil to cover the stem up to the first set of leaves.

Vining and semi-bush pumpkins require hills 4 to 6 feet apart. Plant 5 to 6 seeds to a 1-inch depth and keep the soil moist until the seedlings emerge. Thin to the sturdiest 2 or 3 plants. You can plant miniature and bush varieties in rows 4 feet apart with 2 to 3 feet between plants.

Whether direct-seeded or transplanted, seedlings are very tender and need protection against cold weather and frost. Cold weather will slow the plants' growth, but frost will kill them. To protect the plants from the weather, fashion a makeshift cold frame using scraps of wood and plastic sheeting. Or you can raise overnight temperatures around the

plants by placing gallon plastic milk containers over them. Be sure to uncover the plants in the morning or you'll be replanting.

Mature pumpkins are water hogs, but seedlings need careful water monitoring while establishing their root system. At this point, frequent watering not only saturates the soil and prevents deep rooting but also robs the soil of oxygen and dilutes fertilizers and nutrients.

Depending on the weather, water about every 10 days. As the plants grow they'll use 1 to 1 1/2 inches of water per week. Irrigate with soaker hoses or drip lines every 5 to 7 days. Overhead sprinklers are quick and easy, but you will be watering weeds as well and losing significant moisture to the air. Overall, the plant is its own best gauge. Temporary wilting in the heat of the day is common, but wilting in the morning is a distress signal for an emergency drink.

Pumpkins also are heavy feeders, but a word of caution: The most common problem with fertilizers is over-application. If you apply too little, nothing much happens. But over-applying can burn plants, cause wilting and delay the flowering stage. Watch your plants. They'll tell you what they need. Take it slow and easy and study the results. And, when applying fertilizer, always follow manufacturer's directions and all safety precautions.

A basic fertilizing strategy is to apply a balanced 5-10-5 fertilizer every few weeks throughout the growing period. If you notice retarded growth or a yellowish color, apply extra fertilizer or use a product with more nitrogen to help with lush growth and strong root development.

If you want to fuss a bit and try for those prize-winning specimens, use a fertilizer high in nitrogen until flowers appear. Then, during the fruit-set stage, switch to a fertilizer higher in phosphorous. Fruit set is the overall process of pollination and early growth. For final fruit growth, use a product higher in potassium.

A word about pollination and fruit set. Pumpkins have male and female flowers. Female flowers are identified by the small fruit behind the flower. Sometime in July male flowers will bloom. They will be followed a few weeks later by the female flowers. If pollination has occurred, the female flower will fall off and the baby pumpkin will begin to grow. If pollination did not happen, the young fruit will shrivel. Limited bee activity or extreme heat can cause this to happen.

Hand pollination guarantees greater yields. Pick a male flower, remove the petals and touch the center of the female flowers with the center of the male flower.

As September approaches, leaves will wilt, brown, die back or turn gray. Your pumpkins may come under attack from squash bugs, bacterial wilt, cucumber beetle or powdery mildew, not to mention the onslaught from hail and heat in excess of 100 degrees -- all in the same week. Don't despair. With attention, your otherwise healthy plant will have the stamina to withstand some setbacks. Again, a watchful eye and quick intervention will decrease damages.

October. You might notice a rather unusual number of neighbors, friends or cousins of distant friends who just happened to be walking by and had to "check out" your garden. They have heard. Now they want to see and touch. And you smile. You already know 'Maximus' will be gracing Peggy's front porch. 'JustBoB' is going home with Chris -- children are waiting to carve their artwork. And eventually all of us will be sitting around the Thanksgiving table spooning the warm orange and brown pumpkin pie filling onto our plates.

Pumpkins: What a joy!