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Pumpkins – October 2015

Pumpkins and fall go hand in hand. Today, pumpkins are more than just the traditional carved Jack-o’lantern, they are used to add color and interest in the fall garden along with gourds, hay bales and corn stalks. Pumpkins come in all sizes and shapes, from the traditional orange, to white, red, green and striped; smooth rinds to warty. Over 1 billion pounds of pumpkins are produced in the US each year, with new varieties appearing annually. While pumpkins aren’t difficult to grow, they do require a long time to mature and plenty of space, so most of us let someone else do the growing.

The name pumpkin comes from the Greek word ‘pepon’, meaning ‘large melon’. Pumpkins are members of the cucurbit family, which means they are kissing cousins of cucumbers, squash, watermelons and gourds. Scientifically speaking, pumpkins are a fruit (they contain seeds) but when it comes to cooking, they are often referred to as vegetables. They are normally planted in the garden once the soil warms up in June or early July which will have them ready for a fall harvest. Sizes range from the tiny “Jack-b-little” which produce a softball size fruit up to the giant award winners like “Big Max” and “Prize Winner” which can produce fruits weighing more than 100 pounds. Supposedly the world record is over 1800 pounds for a pumpkin. These giant fruits aren’t that attractive, but they do break records.

Pumpkins have been around a long time, dating back to Peru in 2000 B. C. They were a food staple in the diet of Native Americans. The tradition of carving a pumpkin and lighting it with a candle dates back to the Celtic people. A common tradition each fall was a harvest bonfire, symbolizing the end of summer. Families would carry an ember from this fire to light their own fire at home. The traditional mode of transportation for the ember was a hollowed out turnip. They began to carve faces into their turnips to ward off evil spirits. After the potato famine and the migration to the new world, turnips were not as readily available as pumpkins, so pumpkins became the fruit of choice—and I think, a bit more colorful. While pumpkin carving is still a family tradition, many paint faces on them or simply stack the pumpkins in the landscape, bordering beds or clustering them with mums and pansies, makes them an ornamental as well as a utilitarian one—lasting through Thanksgiving. Once carved, a pumpkin deteriorates in days.

If

decoration is your main goal, choose a pumpkin with a stem attached. Look for one with a smooth rind and free of soft spots or blemishes. If there is no stem, the fruit tends to deteriorate rather quickly. If you choose well, they can last for months both inside and out. To extend their life, clean them and spray them with a clear paint or varnish. Some folks even paint them silver or gold to extend their usefulness into the Christmas season.

When making pumpkin pie, most folks buy canned pumpkin, versus cooking a fresh one, but you can cook the whole pumpkin and make your own pie filling instead of letting Libby do it for you. Pie pumpkins are traditionally smaller fruited forms—usually between three to six pounds. Pumpkins can be roasted and served as a vegetable and you can even cook a stew or soup inside a hollowed out pumpkin and roast it in the oven. The flowers are also edible and roasted pumpkin seeds are a tasty snack. Pumpkins are a good source of nutrition. They are low in calories, fat and sodium and high in fiber. They are loaded with vitamins A and B and potassium. The seeds are very high in protein and are an excellent source of B vitamins and iron.

Pumpkins have become fodder for agri-tourism. Pumpkin patches are springing up all over the state and are a favorite with families and school groups. Hay rides and pumpkin decorating contests add to the festive spirit. In addition to pumpkins, a wide variety of gourds are usually available as well. Many botanical gardens across the country pay homage to the pumpkin and use them extensively in their fall landscapes as well.

As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. You too can use small pumpkins to border your flower beds, or scatter them amongst your flowers. They can be hollowed out and used as a serving bowl for a party or the small ones may be strung together for a garland or wreath, or used as a candlestick holder. Keep in mind, the minute you cut a pumpkin, you shorten its shelf life. A carved or cut pumpkin will only last a few days. Many folks choose to paint faces instead of carving one, but why not do both. Get the whole family into the act. From the round to the Cinderella pumpkins—which have the shape of Cinderella's carriage, to oblong; large or small, orange or white, use pumpkins as decorations, food or both! 'Tis the season!