



Pumpkins?? Yes, Please!!

2026 KAFCE Education Program Year
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Hot Chocolate, anyone?! Orange Smoothie? Funnel Cake? How about a little Kettle Corn or some Mac N Cheese? No, I am not wandering through the state fair concessions or planning refreshments for an FCE party! These "*tempting-my-taste-buds*" items are all varieties of pumpkins! In this lesson I will share some fun facts to help you get pumped-up about pumpkins!

To start with, what we in America commonly refer to as a pumpkin is actually a member of the squash family. The term "pumpkin" has been used since colonial times to refer to anything that is round and orange, while the term "squash" is used for the edible fruit of a vining plant that can be of many various shapes and colors. Gourds are also members of the same Cucurbit family, but have no edible quality and are mainly used for decoration. You will often see pumpkins and squash listed together in your garden catalogs as they are very similar in the way they are cultivated. No one seed catalog lists all 90 or so pumpkin/squash varieties that are available, thank goodness! Despite the differences in names or appearances, they all need the same care during the summer growing season. And nutritionally, both species can provide important nutrients and a pleasant eating experience.

Educational Goals:

1. To learn about the species of pumpkins and squash in the Cucurbit vine crop family.
2. To discuss the many ways pumpkins can be used to enhance our lifestyles.
3. To incorporate the nutritional powerhouse of pumpkins into our diets year around.

Suggested Activities:

1. Take a trip to a local pumpkin patch or tour the pumpkin entries at the state fair.
2. Sponsor a baking contest with all food exhibits to have pumpkin in the recipe.
3. Sponsor a pumpkin decorating contest for your community.
4. Decorate a storefront in your community with multi-colored pumpkins.
5. Share HearthFire Series #68, "Someone's in the Home . . . Eating Healthy Food"

Pumpkin Pilgrimage

All species of squashes and pumpkins are native to the Western Hemisphere with a history dating back thousands of years. Squash were important food plants to the native people of the regions of South, Central, and North America. Pumpkins and other squash species were grown along with maize and beans in a method of companion planting practiced by many North American Indian tribes. The Indians used all parts of the plant for food, medicine, livestock feed, and hand crafts. The movement of tribes facilitated the spread of squash plants across the region. This in time lead to the domestication of the genus and to the development of numerous cultivars that shared similar traits but had distinct differences as well.

Today, seed companies use breeding programs to develop new varieties of squash, winter squash, and pumpkins that highlight characteristics desired by the consumer, such as culinary or decorative traits, while still protecting the heirloom seed viability.

Scientists have grouped the *Cucurbita* genus into four main species with listings of subdivisions in each main category. The four species are: *C. maxima*; *C. moshata*, *C. pepo*, and *C. argyrosperma*.

- With origins near the Andean Valley in South America, the *C. maxima* is one of the most diverse domesticated species of squash. Common varieties include: many large pumpkins varieties, and hubbard, buttercup, delicata, and Turk's Turban squash types.

- Cultivars classified as *C. moshata* originated in the tropical Americas and are generally more tolerant of hot, humid growing conditions. These cultivars also exhibit a greater resistance to disease and insects. Common varieties include those used in pumpkin pie, such as: Dickinson field pumpkin, Kentucky Field, and butternut squash.

- Historically, *C. pepo* is one of the oldest and most widely grown species of squash with known cultivation from southern Mexico all the way north up the Mississippi Valley; performing equally well in dry and moist regions of North America. Most jack-o-lantern pumpkins, zucchini, yellow summer squash, and acorn squash are classified as *C. pepo*.

- The name "argyrosperma" means "silver seeds" the color of seeds found in certain cultivars of the *C. argyrosperma* squash. Varieties such as green cushaw, sweet potato squash, and Japanese pie pumpkins are typical of the *C. argyrosperma* species which originated in Mexico.

Pumpkin Popularity

Pumpkins are produced in all fifty states in the United States and contribute to the ag economy. Illinois leads the nation in pumpkin production with over 15,000 acres devoted to pumpkin production. The Dickinson pumpkin variety, commonly used for pumpkin pie filling, does especially well in the fertile soil and mild climate of Illinois. Most of the canned pumpkin in the U.S comes from that state where annual production is enough cans to make 90 million pumpkin pies. California, Michigan, Texas, and Virginia have acres devoted to growing pumpkin as well. These growers mainly produce the ornamental or jack-o-lantern pumpkins. In addition to North America, pumpkins are grown in Africa, Europe, Asia and South America.



Pumpkin Preferences Big Max, Blue Doll, or Candy Roaster? The seed catalogs are full of tempting pumpkin varieties. How do we know which seed to buy? There are many traits to consider, such as: plant conformation (veining or bush), fruit size and appearance (smooth, deep ribbed, or bumpy), fruit shape (round, flat, tapered, or tulip), fruit color (more than orange or green), stem length, and disease resistance. As edible fruits, the more desirable varieties have greater sugar content and firmer flesh. Using the seeds as snack food can affect the seed selection as well. Many seed companies organize pumpkin varieties in their catalogs by weight and end product use.

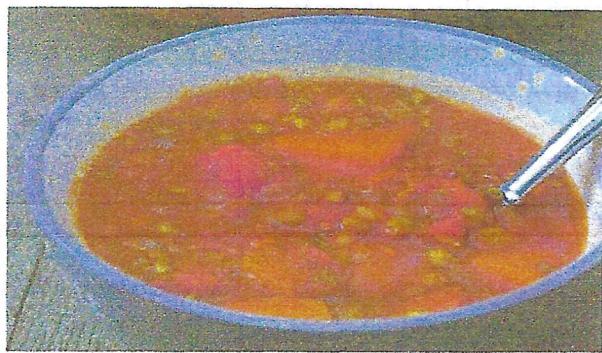
- Giant Pumpkins (120-200#, up to 2000#) competition pumpkins; i.e. Atlantic Giant, Big Max
- Large pumpkins (30-60#) jack o'lantern pumpkins; i.e. Denali, Everest, or Summit
- Medium Pumpkins (7-30#) multi-purpose pumpkins; i.e. Blue Hubbard, Crown Prince, or Howden
- Small Pumpkins (1/2# - 7#) multi-purpose pumpkins; i.e. Barndance, Mac N Cheese, Winter Luxury
- Mini Pumpkins (1/2# - 3#) decorative pumpkins; i.e. Baby Bear, Little Daisy, Vanilla Cupcake
- Specialty Pumpkins: decorative pumpkins; i.e. Calico Belle, Kettle Corn, Funnel Cake

Pumpkin Production Plant your pumpkin seeds in late May or early June when all danger of frost is past. Pumpkin vines need lots of space, so plant 1-2 seeds per hill and have rows 4 to 5 feet apart or as directed by the seed company. Limit disease exposure by avoiding planting seeds in the same area where other vining plants were grown in previous years. Keep weeds at bay and use pesticides sparingly as bees are needed to pollinate the flowers. Pumpkins are ready for harvest when the skin is tough and the stem no longer leaks when cut from the vine. Immediately after harvest, allow pumpkins to cure in a dry location for 2-3 weeks before moving to a cool, dry location for long term storage.

Pumpkin Parties Many of the pumpkins harvested in the United States are intended for ornamental use. As a decorative tool, they are reasonably priced, and with their broad palette of colors and interesting shapes pumpkins can brighten any special occasion. Baby Boo, Bat wing, Casper, and Warty Goblin are easy selections for a Halloween spook house. Their names aptly describe what they look like! Traditional jack-o'-lantern varieties, such as Connecticut Field and Autumn Gold, are good choices for carving out a toothy Halloween face! Plan a princess party with Fairytale pumpkins, like Cinderella or Munchkin on hand. We admire fall harvest arrangements of orange, green, or gray pumpkins stacked near an entry door, but if stored correctly, soft yellow, white, or blue mini pumpkins add a creative touch to a spring centerpiece. Whether smooth or warty, the skin of a pumpkin makes an easy canvas for painted details to be added.

Pumpkin Power Most parts of the pumpkin plant are edible, with pumpkin flesh and pumpkin seeds or "pepitas" being good sources of essential nutrients. According to the USDA, a 3.5 ounce serving of raw pumpkin provides 26 calories and is an excellent source of vitamin A, beta-carotene, and also Vitamin C. When ripe, pumpkin flesh can be boiled, baked, steamed or roasted. Pumpkin seeds are a popular snack and good sources of protein. Pumpkin oil can be extracted from seeds and used as cooking oil. Pumpkins also make a beneficial feed source for chickens, beef, and other livestock.

Pumpkin Possibilities



Varieties like Snack Jack, Golden Hubbard, and Sweet Sugar Pie are reminders that pumpkin dishes are popular menu items following autumn harvest. Mash cooked pumpkin and use it to make soups, sauces, cakes and pastries. Pumpkin breads and pumpkin pie are staples at many homes during the Thanksgiving holiday. Making and keeping pumpkin puree on hand throughout the year creates endless possibilities for pumpkin enriched foods like deviled eggs, quesadillas, yogurt, smoothies, milk shakes, pancakes, chili soups, breads, cakes, fudge and even hot chocolate!!

Whether you grow your own pumpkin for autumn harvest, or pull a can off the grocery shelf, I want to encourage you to include pumpkin or squash in your weekly menu planning, and to incorporate some festive pumpkin pizzazz into your home decor. Pumpkins?? Really?? Yes, Please!!

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