

## PUMPKINS

(*Curcubita pepo*)

by Stephanie Wrightson, Master Gardener



Sonoma County, the home of Charles Shultz who gave us The Great Pumpkin in his cartoon strip, is an ideal location to grow pumpkins (*Curcubita pepo*). There is a lot to be said for growing pumpkins--whether it is a delicious and nutritious meal or dessert, a blue ribbon at the county fair, a scary or friendly jack-o-lantern created with your children or grandchildren or a homey or elegant arrangement on your harvest table. Many must agree because California is the leading U.S. producer of pumpkin.

### WHEN AND WHAT TO PLANT

The Sonoma County Master Gardener [Vegetable Planting Summary](#) recommends sowing pumpkins (*Curcubita pepo*) directly into the ground April 15<sup>th</sup> to June 15<sup>th</sup> with harvest in September or October. Different varieties of pumpkins take different lengths of time to mature--most taking 100 to 115 days from planting to harvest. Be sure to sow your pumpkin seeds early if your desired variety takes 120 days to mature, or select an early 90-day variety if your area has a short growing season.

The *California Master Gardener Handbook* recommends a number of pumpkin varieties and includes two multipurpose, intermediate-sized varieties (8-15 lb fruit) that are “All American selections” (AAS) meaning that they are hardy in most areas and are resistant to most diseases.



Multipurpose:

- *C. pepo* ‘Spirit,’ (AAS; semi-bush)
- *C. pepo* ‘Autumn Gold’ (AAS; early harvest; turns gold before maturity)

Carving:

- *C. pepo* ‘Jack O’Lantern’ (intermediate size)

Large (good for showing):

- *C. pepo* ‘Big Max’ (typically 50-100 lbs)

Containers or smaller gardens:

- *C. pepo* ‘Bushkin’ (intermediate-sized fruit; compact vine)

Culinary:

- *C. maxima* ‘Cinderella’ (aka ‘Rouge Vif d’Etampes’) is a flattened, deep red-orange variety (think: Cinderella’s carriage). The *C. maxima* are the “Mammoths” that look and taste like pumpkins, but are not true pumpkins.

- Mini varieties with “sugar” in their name lend themselves to culinary uses as do the multipurpose varieties above.

## GARDEN PLANNING

Pumpkins can take up a lot of room in a home or community vegetable garden. If you decide to plant them in rows, leave 48 inches between each plant and 72 inches between rows. An option is to plant them in hills: plant six seeds in a circle about 10 inches in diameter; then, thin to three plants with hills 6-10 feet apart. Mini pumpkins can be planted on a wire fence or tomato cage. Larger fruit grown on a trellis may require supports--slings made out of torn t-shirts work well. Check your seed packet because some bush types can spread to more than 20 feet. That sounds like a lot of space! But, depending on the intended use, most families of four will find one to three plants sufficient as most vines will produce three to five pumpkins per vine.



## PLANTING AND CARE

With Sonoma County’s long growing season, there is no need to start plants indoors. Seeds can be sown directly into the soil following the directions on the seed packet. Pumpkins grow in a wide range of soils. But, if you have high clay content in your soil (where excessive moisture may lead to problems with root and stem diseases) or very sandy soil (where moisture stress may interrupt foliage and fruit growth), amend your soil with organic compost or plant in raised garden beds. Infrequent, deep watering is recommended. Allow time for the soil surface to dry between watering. Pumpkins require bee or hand pollination to produce optimal yields. Consider planting herbs, ornamentals, or other flowering vegetables nearby that will attract bees and other beneficials. If you are growing jack-o-lanterns and are careful, you can scratch a name into the fruit before the shell is hardened (usually in late August or early September). The inscription will callus over and become more distinguishable as the pumpkin matures.

## INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT (IPM)

Cucurbits (pumpkins and squash) are relatives of cucumbers and melons and, therefore, may suffer from similar pests and diseases. A [problem diagnosis chart](#) for the home gardener is provided by the UC-Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center. Keep leaves dry to prevent foliar wilt diseases. A drip system or hose tape laid on the surface of the soil (but under the mulch) is advisable. If this is not possible, water early enough in the day so that leaves will dry before evening.

## HARVESTING AND STORING



If you plan to store pumpkins, leave them on the vine until they mature. Mature pumpkins have hard outer shells and are generally even-colored. The side touching the soil may be lighter in color. If the stems are fleshy, the fruit is immature. To harvest, use a sharp knife to cut the stem of the pumpkin to avoid bruising, leaving three to five inches of the

stem. Do not pick up your pumpkins by the stem; without the stem, they will not store well.

Store pumpkins in a dry, fairly cool location (ideally, 55-59°F at 50-70 percent relative humidity). Under these conditions, if you harvest mature, not over-ripe fruit, you can expect a storage life of up to 60 days.

Culinary pumpkin varieties are low-calorie, delicious and nutritious. They are loaded with beta-carotene (converted to Vitamin A in our bodies). They can be steamed, fried, puréed, roasted or baked. Two cautions: Do not re-use jack-o-lanterns in a recipe. Carved pumpkins are a perfect place for bacteria to grow and jack-o-lanterns varieties are not the best for eating. USDA instructs not to can mashed or puréed pumpkin or pumpkin butter. Pumpkin is a low-acid food capable of supporting the growth of the bacteria that causes botulism. Use it in a pie instead-- your family will thank you.

