

# Pumpkins: All you need to know

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School is back in session, the leaves and air are getting crisp and the days are getting shorter. All of this can only mean one thing, fall is officially here. When thinking of fall, one often thinks of pumpkins. They have been a symbol of fall for decades and although the majority of them are grown back East, you can still see and visit pumpkin fields around Central Oregon.

Pumpkins are members of the *Curcubita* genus which also produces other fruits like winter squash, muskmelon, watermelon, cucumbers and gourds. Pumpkins originated in Central America and have been growing in America for over 5,000 years. In 1584, French explorer Jacques Cartier reported that he had found, “gros melons,” which translated into the English language as “ponpions,” which since, has evolved into the word, pumpkin. Native Americans referred to pumpkins as, “isoqoutm,” or “isquotersquash,” which is where the word squash comes from. The tradition of decorating and carving pumpkins actually came from the Irish who originally carved turnips and potatoes in response to an old Irish folktale about a man named Stingy Jack, which is also where the name Jack-o’lantern came from. When the Irish began to immigrate to America, they discovered pumpkins were softer and easier to carve, which eventually led to the traditional fall activity of pumpkin carving.

There are many different varieties of pumpkins used world-wide for an array of purposes. A main difference in pumpkin varieties is their size, which can be divided into five categories: giant (larger than 20 lbs.), Jack-o’lantern (7-20 lbs.), small or pie pumpkins (4-7 lbs.), baby pumpkins (1-3 lbs.) and miniature pumpkins (less than 1 lb.). The majority of pumpkins sold in stores and u-pick farms are from a Jack-o’lantern variety. In addition to size, there are different color varieties grown ranging from red, to white, to blueish-grey and even striped. Varieties are also bred for specific purposes such as carving, decorating, processing or baking. For example, varieties of Jack-o’lantern pumpkins are normally stringy and lack flavor, so smaller, pie pumpkins are used for cooking and baking.

Pumpkins are a warm weather loving crop and are generally planted in June, with harvest taking place in late September to mid-October. Honeybees are necessary for pollination and for obtaining high yields of quality fruit. Pumpkins produce separate male and female flowers on each plant, which are edible, with male flowers appearing first and in greater numbers. When pumpkins are ready to go to market, they are hand-harvested with a sharp cutting tool. They are normally fully mature when their color has deepened uniformly, the rind becomes hard and the stems have lost their succulence. Once they are cut, they are windrowed into piles or lines in the field for loading. The pumpkins are then placed into large cardboard boxes or wood bins and transferred to their destination. Pumpkins can be stored in a well-ventilated, cool location for about one to two months. Multiple harvests over a period of three to four weeks are common on most farms.