

GROWING PUMPKIN

Roast them, mash them, steam them, turn them into soup or scones (depending on geography). You can puree them, stuff them or put a candle in them and call them Jack - pumpkins are a very versatile veggie.

Yes, yes - before you bombard me with instructive emails, I know that pumpkins grow on a vine and therefore are technically a fruit (so purists, please replace versatile veggie with fabulous fruit).

They are a member of the gourd family (with squash, marrow and zucchini), originating in South America. In some parts of the world, they are dismissed as cattle fodder or a pretty ground cover, but luckily, not so in Australia.

Most commonly grown varieties in this region are Butternut (pear-shaped, prolific and not quite as rampant as other varieties), Jap (dark green skin with yellow flecks), Queensland Blue (slate-blue skin and distinctly ribbed) and Golden Nugget (a bush variety with small, tasty fruit).

Site and soil

Choose a sunny, sheltered spot in the garden for your pumpkins. Before planting, improve the soil with compost, well-rotted manure or other organic matter. They tolerate a range of soil conditions but need good drainage.

You will need a fair bit of room as the vines tend to wander. If you don't have a lot of room, try a bush variety, or set up a trellis and encourage your vines to grow up instead of out.

Planting

Pumpkins need a long, warm growing season to reach maturity. However, seeds won't germinate in cold soil. So either sow seeds in pots or in a protected place and then transplant into your garden, *or* direct sow after the last frost - October or November.

Sow seeds at a depth of about 1-2 cm on hills; germination should occur in 8-10 days. Hills should be spaced about 2m apart and can be home to 2-3 seeds or seedlings. Protect seedlings with mulch.

Cultivating

Pumpkins need regular watering and will be very happy with an application of compost tea or other liquid fertiliser during the growing season.

Removing growing tips if you want to encourage branching and fruit-set. For extra-large fruit, experts suggest allowing only one fruit to develop per vine. As fruits get bigger, you can raise them up on wood or straw to prevent rotting.

Harvesting

Leave pumpkin fruits on the vine for as long as possible, but try to get them off before the first heavy frost, which may damage the fruit. Ideally, wait until their skin has

hardened and the stem is dry. When harvesting, use secateurs and leave a length of stalk attached to the fruit.

If the fruit is intended for storage, 'cure' them first by exposing the skin to the sun for a few days and allowing it to dry out completely.



Problems

Pumpkins don't have many pests, but will end up with powdery mildew if they don't have enough sunlight or good air circulation. Excessive heat or rain may result in poor pollination, which may necessitate hand pollination.

Choosing and using

Although you can buy pumpkins all year round, bumper season is autumn to early winter. At the markets, choose fruit that seems heavy for its size, with undamaged skin and a bit of stalk still attached.

Store whole pumpkins for two or three months in a cool, dark place with good ventilation. Store cut pumpkin (wrapped) in the crisper, once the seeds and stringy bits have been removed.

For those intrigued with Halloween, my Canadian friend Rachel has entrusted me with her Jack O'Lantern-making secrets. Firstly, cut a 'lid' in the top with a paring knife. Get the kids to scoop out the innards and then neaten the insides with a spoon or knife. Draw a face on the broadest side of the pumpkin and get to work with the paring knife. Make a hollow inside for the candle, replace the lid, and presto! But don't light the candle until after dark.

The pumpkins she uses in Canada are not eating varieties. She chooses bigger fruit because the walls are thinner and they are pretty hollow. She also swears by roasting the cleaned seeds in olive oil and sea salt.

References and further reading

- The Farmers Market Companion (Viking Books)
- Organic vegetable gardening (Annette McFarlane)
- The Canberra Gardener

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