

Pumpkins & SQUASHES

Pumpkins and squashes are a delicious addition to your veggie patch and store well over the winter. *By Gillian Carson*

At this time of year, our thoughts turn to harvesting what's left of our crops, taking stock and storing up produce for the Winter ahead. The vegetable garden is in its few final weeks before it shuts down completely and the race is on to get everything inside before the first frosts arrive.

A row of neatly lined up, flame-coloured pumpkins curing in the Autumn sun seems to fit in just nicely. And so does their taste. There's nothing like a warming cup of nutty pumpkin soup made from the deep and dense flesh of your favourite, home-grown variety to comfort you on a chilly day.

Whether you choose a warty green type that looks like reptile's skin or a smooth and curvy fairytale pumpkin, growing your own can be rewarding – and lots of fun! Children particularly love the different colours, sizes and shapes that emerge from the sometimes triffid-like plants. It's fun to see how

quickly they grow and you can feel more than a little bit smug with a potting shed full of sweet pumpkins to eat during the dark winter months.

CHOOSE YOUR TYPE

Pumpkins, squashes (both winter and summer) and gourds are all part of the same plant family – *cucurbitaceae*, or *cucurbits*. The family also includes cucumbers and melons. All of these plants grow in a similar way – they have a long trailing habit with large heart-shaped leaves. Most carry male (pollen-bearing) and female (seed-bearing) flowers and produce large, tasty fruits.

Pumpkins

These typically have a thick orange, yellow or grey/green shell and tend to be larger than squash, weighing in at 4-8kg.

Summer Squashes

This group includes courgettes and marrows and the small custard squashes that are harvested while still immature and soft. These cannot be stored and should be eaten fresh.

Winter Squashes

This group of squashes is left to mature and the outer skin is left to harden in the same way as pumpkins. Squashes tend to be smaller than pumpkins and have a more nutty, sweet taste. This group includes the popular Butternut and Acorn squash. >



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www.pumpkinpatchesandmore.org/ukpumpkins.php*Gourds*

These are fun to grow as they come in all shapes, sizes and colours. However, they are not edible. Usually, gourds are grown for decoration, or can be made into instruments, utensils or bowls.

WHERE AND WHEN TO PLANT?

Start off by buying some fresh seed. Pumpkin seed can be unpredictable if it's been kept for a few years, so buy a new pack to ensure that the seed is fresh.

To give your plants the longest possible growing time, sow your seed indoors in late April to early May. Plant the seed on its side so that it will have the best chance of germination and cover with potting compost. Place in a heated propagator or keep at a constant temperature of 65-70F/18-21C until you see green shoots appear. Then move to a warm, light area – ideally a heated greenhouse or sunny windowsill. If

this sounds a bit involved and you don't have the space or equipment to raise pumpkins from seed, you can always buy seedlings from your local garden centre in late Spring.

Pumpkins like to be in full sun. They also appreciate a well-drained site that is very rich in organic matter. The popular anecdote is that you can plant a pumpkin directly into the compost heap! And you can, provided the heap is well-rotted and not in use.

To prepare the soil for planting a pumpkin, first dig a hole about a spade's depth and fill it with well-rotted manure or compost. Sprinkle on some general-purpose fertilizer and leave it to rest for a few weeks. At the beginning of June, or when there is no risk of frost in your area, plant them into your prepared bed. If they're indoor-raised seedlings, harden them off first by putting them outside on sunnier days to fully acclimatise them to the weather.

Remember pumpkin and squash plants can grow up to 6m/20ft or even longer, so ensure that your seedlings have plenty of room to grow. If space is an issue, you may even consider growing them up a wigwam or support, although this is only suitable for the smaller pumpkins and squashes that are lighter in weight.

Pumpkins and squashes are not just for growing in the open ground but are

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Photos by
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equally happy in a container or even growbag. Provided they have a rich enough soil to grow in, they will be happy virtually anywhere where there is sun. You would normally plant one per standard-sized growbag.

GROWING

Once you have planted your pumpkin or squash, caring for it is quite simple. They need a lot of water so don't let the soil dry out. In fact, try to keep the soil around your plants constantly moist without waterlogging them. You can also sink an upturned plastic litre bottle into the soil right next to the plant so that the water can get straight to the roots.

Once the plant has settled in and started to grow, you will see some large, new leaves. Pumpkins can grow quite quickly and will soon start to flower. They usually send out male flowers first (flowers without any swelling underneath) and female flowers next



(flowers with a small swelling below the petals that will become the fruit). At this point, it's a good idea to feed your plants every two weeks with a high-potash liquid feed, like tomato feed.

Usually the large flowers will be pollinated easily by bees. However, if you're growing your pumpkins and squashes in a greenhouse or coldframe, you may have to hand-pollinate them in order to get any fruits. This is quite easy – simply snip off a male flower, remove the petals and rub the pollen onto the female flower.

You can also prune your pumpkin plant by taking out any side-shoots from the main stem. This will reduce the amount of fruits the plant will bear, but the ones left will be bigger. So, in effect, you can choose whether to have lots of small fruit or one whopper!

HARVESTING

You should harvest your pumpkin before the first frosts. But how do you tell if it's ready to be harvested or not? Well, there are a few clues that, to the trained eye, will make it clear that your pumpkin is quite ready.

Firstly, you may notice that the plant starts to die back a little. The stem of the pumpkin might start to twist and start to go dry, which is also a good sign. The pumpkin will sound hollow when tapped and have a deep, rich colour. However, the most likely indicator is that the outer skin has started to harden. If you can easily indent the skin of your pumpkin with your nail, it's probably still

immature. Use a sharp knife to cut the pumpkin away from the plant, making sure to leave the stem a few inches long.

PICK YOUR OWN

If you didn't grow any this season, don't worry because now that pumpkins and squashes are in season, the choice in the shops and farmer's markets should increase. You can also visit a pumpkin farm at this time of year and cut your own for either carving or eating. Either way, a pumpkin makes a fantastic Autumnal treat as much for the eyes as the taste buds. ●



How to Store Your Pumpkin

Pumpkins and Winter squashes can be stored for up to six months, making it well worth growing lots so that you can store and eat them throughout the winter. If you plan to store yours, place a tile or piece of old carpet underneath the fruit as it matures. This discourages slug damage and rot that can reduce storage time.

Once you have harvested your pumpkin, it will need time to secure. Put your pumpkins in a sunny spot that is sheltered from rain. A cold-frame or ventilated greenhouse is ideal. Leave them for 10 - 12 days and the outer skin fully hardens.

You can now store them in a frost-free but cool place. A garage, porch, or shed is ideal. Just make sure that it's watertight as moisture will encourage your pumpkins to rot.

