



Pumpkin

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Takeover Bid

Pumpkins are some of the most vigorous members of the cucurbit family, but don't let their trifold-like tendrils put you off. While retail seed stocks reflect the relatively limited number of varieties produced by commercial growers, non-hybrid seed companies and seed savers networks present a picture of remarkable diversity.



FACT FILE

Botanical Name: *Cucurbita maxima*

Family: Cucurbitaceae

Climatic Range: Pumpkins require a long growing season, but can be grown across a wide range of climates. The seeds require temperatures around 16 degrees Celsius to germinate successfully. They are usually planted after the last frost in cool climates and in spring, summer and early autumn in mild to warm climates. Established vines are tolerant of cold temperatures, but will be killed off by frost.

Planting and Harvest: In frost prone districts plants can be started off in pots grown under glass or bubble wrap. Germination occurs in 7-10 days. Perfect drainage is essential as the large seeds have a tendency to rot. Plant out after the danger of frost has past but avoid disturbing the roots, as this will set back the seedlings considerably. In frost-free regions seeds may be planted directly into the soil. Avoid planting during the rainy season in tropical areas or plants may fall victim to leaf diseases. Pumpkins are commonly grown for their hard skinned, long keeping fruits but the shoots, tendrils, flowers and seeds are also edible. Mature pumpkins have a hollow sound when lightly tapped.

Ode to Manure

Pumpkins love compost and manure. Create raised mounds of compost, fork in a generous helping into garden beds or prepare a nutrient rich no dig garden in which to grow your pumpkins. A pH of 6.5-7 and good drainage is required. Establish your 2-3 plants spaced at 2m intervals, remembering that pumpkins are the most vigorous of all the cucurbits. Pinching out growing tips promotes branching and encourages fruit set, but if you are short on space let them grow up and over the garden shed, along the fence line or where ever you like.

If your soil is poor or you want to grow a monster sized crop, growth can be supplemented through regular applications of liquid seaweed, manure or compost tea.

Problem Solved

Flowers that appear to form small fruit, then yellow and fall off indicate poor pollination. Try hand pollination in these instances. Fungal diseases commonly affect the foliage. Where the damage is severe seaweed sprays and wettable sulphur may be used. Placing some straw or other dry material beneath each developing fruit can reduce fruit rot brought about by contact with the soil.

Take Your Pick

The **Queensland Blue**, triangle shaped **Triamble** and heavily ridged **Jarrahdale** are vigorous vines that produce large, long keeping, deep orange fleshed fruit.

Golden Nugget grows on a more compact bush, is quick maturing and produces rounded fruit with pale orange flesh. **Atlantic Giant** is grown more for size than flavour. Fruit of this competition variety are usually fed to stock and are sometimes known as cow pumpkins. To grow monster giant pumpkins, only allow one fruit to develop on each vine.



Crown Prince (also known as *Whangaparaoa Crown*) has a hard, grey skin that makes it an excellent long keeping variety. The flesh is deep orange in colour, dry and sweet tasting. **Ironbark** also stores well. It has dark grey-green skin and yellow-orange flesh.

Pink Banana produces large torpedo shaped fruit. The skin has a pink tinge, while the flesh is orange. *Pink Banana* does not store for extended periods, but its sweet flavour makes it popular for use in pie, scone and soup recipes.

Turkish Turban produces curious orange and green striped fruit that appear to wear a decorative turban or beret. While edible, its bumpy shape makes it difficult to peel and the taste is regarded as inferior to other varieties. When it comes to novelty value however, it wins hands down.

Seed saver networks, non-hybrid seed companies and organic growing groups are the best seed sources for gardeners wanting to access a diverse variety of pumpkin types.

Pumpkin Imposters

The cucurbit family is full of impersonators. For example, the **Butternut** pumpkin is not really a pumpkin, but a gramma (*Cucurbita moschata*), a distinct group of cucurbits that includes the curvaceous trombones. They are well-suited to subtropical and tropical regions. *Butternut* is less vigorous than some other varieties, prolific bearing and keeps well.

Similarly most of the small growing pumpkins such as **Sweet Dumpling**, **Baby Bear** and **Jack-Be-Little**, botanically speaking belong to the squash group (*Cucurbita pepo*). To add to the confusion the so-called **Hubbard Squash** is not a squash, but a pumpkin (*C. maximum*).

Seed Saving

Fortunately you do not need to be a botanist to grow your own pumpkins or even to save your own seed. As the cucurbit group are notoriously promiscuous, gardeners wishing to save seed should hand pollinate selected female flowers before they open. Plants bear separate male and female flowers on the one vine. Locate a mature female flower that is just about to open and gently prize open the petals. Pluck a male flower and dab it gently into the centre of the female flower to transfer some pollen.



Remember that both the male and female flower must be from the same vine to produce a pure strain. Cover the pollinated flower with pantyhose or a paper bag to avoid subsequent contamination by insects. Once the fruit has set to the size of a tennis ball it can be uncovered, labelled as suitable for seed saving and left to mature.

Yours To Keep

As the crop matures the vine begins to die off. Clip the fruit from the vine, keeping at least 5cm of the stalk in tact. Cure the pumpkins to ensure good storage qualities by exposing the skin to the sun. Well-matured fruits generally have the most flavour. Some varieties store for 10 months or more.

If the fruit stalk of a pumpkin is damage during harvest the keeping quality of the fruit is reduced. Consume these fruits first or, seal the wound with a few drops of candle wax.