

Q: I saved seeds from my pumpkin last year, and although the plants grew huge, the pumpkins were small and shaped oddly. How can I grow pumpkins, both for carving and for pie?

A: Pumpkins that are sold for carving are a different variety than those for cooking. Carving pumpkins have thin, watery flesh and are rarely cooked. The pumpkins grown for cooking are much heavier, with dense finely textured flesh. Just to confuse things, pumpkins are fruits, not vegetables.

You want the same growing conditions for both: full sun, richly amended soil, lots of room, little weed competition and plenty of water. Choose the area now that you want to plant next spring. Dig the bed to an 18" depth, adding 6-8" of finished compost. Cover the area with a 3-4" layer of mulch, and wait until the soil warms in the spring to about 68F at a four inch depth to plant seeds. If you want to jumpstart the plants, plant the seeds inside about three weeks before you think the soil will warm up enough. Black plastic laid over the soil will facilitate warming if the sun is shining.

Spend the winter months researching the varieties you want to plant. Saving seed from pumpkins is a bit tricky, as these plants are willing to cross with any nearby cucurbit relative; gourds, melons, cucumbers, squash; which means that saved seed may have very different genetics than its parents. If you want to save seed, you need to learn to recognize male and female blossoms, and how to hand fertilize, protecting the bloom from any stray pollen that a bee might bring by.

Purchasing seed is easy, with many excellent varieties available. Once planted, the seedlings should emerge in 7-10 days if the soil has been kept moist and warm. The first leaves you see are the cotyledons, or seed leaves which look quite different from the true leaves. Pumpkins are considered heavy feeders, and side dressing the plants with a high nitrogen fertilizer is recommended once the true leaves appear. Pumpkins are not xeric plants, and need regular watering. Keep the soil mulched to reduce evaporation, and remove weeds regularly. In about 3 weeks the male flowers open, with the female flowers appearing about a week later. The females are easy to identify, as they have a tiny pumpkin at the base of the flower. Pollen is transferred by insects (or by people), and in 90-120 days you should have mature pumpkins ready for harvest.

There are some wonderful varieties for cooking, including the tan-colored Long Island Cheese, and the Australian Blue Jarrahdale. KaKai is a carving variety with hull-less seeds, terrific for roasting. Pumpkin growing is fun, and a great way to introduce children to the joy of growing your own.