

What About Pumpkins?

As we approach pumpkin season, it might be fitting to pitch a few pumpkin facts.

Pumpkins are a fruit, not a vegetable. It is related to gourds, melons, cucumbers, gherkins and squash. Pumpkins have long sprawling vines that cover the ground and need lots of space to grow. They can range in size from small Jack-O'-Lanterns to more than 100 pounds depending on the variety grown and the culture provided. Two pumpkins on display at Madera Fair exceeded 100 pounds.

Pumpkins have been grown in America for over 5,000 years. They are indigenous to the western hemisphere and were completely unknown in Europe before the time of Columbus. Pumpkins and other forms of squash were part of the basic diet of the native people of America. "Native Americans dried strips of pumpkin and wove them into mats. They also roasted long strips of pumpkin on the open fire and ate them. The origin of pumpkin pie occurred when the colonists sliced off the pumpkin top, removed the seeds, and filled the insides with milk, spices and honey. The pumpkin was then baked in hot ashes." (University of Illinois Extension).

Pumpkin seeds are planted in the field from the last week of May to middle of June. After seeds are planted, they will sprout in 7-10 days, depending on the variety. During this time, seeds need moisture and warmth. Once seeds have germinated, they will send up their first leaves, called seed leaves.

During the next stage, true leaves develop. Yellow flowers begin to appear after the first three weeks of growth. Male flowers, which produce the pollen, are seen first. This is also true for squash and cucumbers. About a week later, the female flowers emerge. Female flowers are generally larger than the male flowers. They are easy to spot in pumpkins because they have tiny pumpkins at their base. When both male and female flowers appear on the vine, bees, moths and flies assist in pollination by transferring pollen from males to the females. Once pollinated, the fruit at the base of the female blossom develops into a full-sized pumpkin. It takes 90-120 days, depending on variety, for a pumpkin to mature.

California Master Gardeners Handbook, available through the University of California Extension office in Fresno or (Madera?), suggests that a pumpkin grower can scratch a name into the fruit before the shell is hardened, in late August or early September. The inscription will callus over and become more distinguishable as the pumpkin matures.

Recommended disease resistant pumpkin varieties, as well as for other fruits and vegetables specific to San Joaquin and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, can be found in the California M.G. Handbook. Recommended pumpkin varieties listed : Spirit (semi-bush, multipurpose) Autumn Gold (multipurpose, turns gold before maturity) Jack O'Lantern (good for carving) Big Max (large fruit for showing) bushkin (compact vine for large container or garden) Cinderella (unspecified)

The Cobb Ranch located between Fresno and Madera, offers educational tours designed for student groups and families. Learn about growing pumpkins and developmental stages of the pumpkin plant first hand (and so much more) then pick one and take it home. The farm is just 5 minutes from River Park on Highway 41. See www.cobbranch.com or 559-439-0606.

The Garden of the Sun in Fresno is offering seasonal fall activities. GOS is open to the public on Saturday, October 18th for "Octoberfest." See the autumn garden colors and enjoy refreshments in lovely environment. Shop at the country store, enjoy a wide selection of plants at the plant sale, participate in the silent auction or make use the plant clinic to answer your plant questions. Pumpkin carving for children is offered. Call 456-7285 for more information.

Ramona Frances of Madera is a University of California Master Gardener. She can be contacted by e-mail at garden@psnw.com. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a msg, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person.