

Picking the perfect pumpkin is an art. Finding one with the perfect size and shape that can be turned into just the right jack-o-lantern is tougher than it sounds. Whether its orange or white, finding that flawless pumpkin can be made a little easier with just a little assistance.

Knowing a little more about pumpkin can ensure the perfect one is in your future. Pumpkins are in the cucurbit family, the same family as watermelon, cucumbers, and zucchini. Imagine what would happen if we carved zucchini for Halloween instead of pumpkins. Pumpkin flesh and seeds can be cooked and eaten, but that doesn't mean all should be made into pumpkin pie. Pie pumpkins are orange pumpkins that are usually smaller than the size of a volleyball. These pumpkins are the best for eating the flesh because of their sweet flavor and less stringy texture. You can eat the flesh of larger jack-o-lantern type pumpkins, but the eating quality is decreased. The seeds of most the pumpkins can be roasted and eaten.

Picking a ripe pumpkin and curing it properly is key to having it store longer. A pumpkin is ripe when the outside skin is hard and not able to be punctured easily with a fingernail. If it is picked too immature, the pumpkin won't store long-term and will begin to rot. There are many different types and colors of pumpkins and ornamental squash, so don't pick for ripeness based on color alone. Harvest by cutting the pumpkins from the vine, making sure to leave a nice piece of stem attached. The stem helps to ensure the pumpkin stores longer. Try to avoid the temptation to pick the pumpkin up by the 'handle' or stem, which can cause it to break off.

Once the ripe pumpkin is picked, let the curing begin. Curing causes the pumpkins' skin to harden. Allow the ripe pumpkin to remain in the garden during dry, sunny weather for 7-14 days or bring the pumpkins inside to an area of 80-85 degrees F and 80-85% humidity for about 10 days. Pumpkins purchased at garden centers or stores probably have already been through the curing process. After you have picked the perfect pumpkin and properly cured it, it's time to give it a bath. Washing pumpkins isn't required, but it can make them last longer. Wiping down the outside with a dilute bleach solution can help to remove surface bacterial and fungal spores.

A properly stored pumpkin can last for 10 weeks or more. Keep the cured pumpkin in an area that is cool, 50-60 degrees, with at least 50-70% humidity, like a root cellar or cool basement. It is best if pumpkins are placed in a single row, not touching each other. This will allow air flow around the pumpkins and decrease the chances of rot.

Once you have the perfect pumpkin, let the carving begin. Avoid any pumpkins with soft spots or other wounds that will shorten the life-span of your jack-o-lantern. If you draw or color your creation on the outside of the pumpkin, it is still edible. If you intend to carve your creation, there is a little more work involved and the pumpkin should no longer be eaten. Scoop out the seeds, which can be roasted or fed to the birds, and carve out the picture of your choice. To make the jack-o-lantern last a little longer, give it a bleach bath again on the cut portions. The weather depends how long your creation will last, the cooler the weather the longer it will survive. Aim to get about a week out of your carved pumpkin before it starts melting into a puddle like the Wicked Witch of the West.

With a little time and effort that orange beauty could be providing months of decoration well into the fall season.

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