



Picking the perfect pumpkin is an art. Finding one with the right size and shape that can be transformed into a jack-o-lantern or selecting a pumpkin that will make the perfect pie is more difficult than it sounds. Whether its orange, yellow, brown 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, winter squash, and zucchini. Imagine carving zucchini for a Halloween jack-o-lantern instead of pumpkins, it wouldn't go nearly as well.

Pumpkin flesh and seeds can be cooked and eaten, but that doesn't mean all pumpkins 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 and squash can be roasted and eaten, outer hull and all.

Picking a ripe pumpkin and curing it properly is key to having a long storage life. Pumpkin and winter squash are ripe when the outside skin is hard and not easily punctured with a fingernail. If it is picked too immature, the fruit won't store long-term and will begin to rot. There are many different types and colors of pumpkins, winter and ornamental squash, ripeness shouldn't be based on color alone. Harvest by cutting the fruit from the vine, making sure to leave a nice piece of stem attached. The stem helps to ensure the pumpkin and squash stores longer. Pumpkins without stems tend to dry out faster and increases their chances of rot fungi. Avoid the temptation to pick the pumpkin up by the 'handle' or stem, which can cause it to break off. Rather, pick the pumpkin up from around the base and carry it around the base.

Once the ripe pumpkin is picked, let the curing begin. Curing vegetables, when done properly, allows the pumpkins' skin to harden and store for longer periods. After picking, allow the ripe pumpkin and winter squash to remain in the garden during dry, sunny weather for 7-14 days or bring them inside to an area of 80-85 degrees F and 80-85% humidity for about 10 days. After you have picked the perfect pumpkin and its been properly cured, it's time to give it a bath. Washing pumpkins isn't required, but it can make them last longer. Wiping down or dipping the outside with a dilute bleach solution can help to remove surface bacterial and fungal spores.

Cool temperatures and proper airflow are needed for storing pumpkins for future use. A properly stored pumpkin can last for 10 weeks or more. To store a pumpkin to use later, keep the cured pumpkin and winter squash 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 the fruits are placed in a single row, not touching each other. This will allow air flow around the pumpkins and squash and decrease the chances of rot. Monitor regularly for soft or rotting produce and remove promptly.

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, the flesh is still edible. If you intend to carve your creation, there is a little more work involved and the pumpkin flesh should no longer be eaten. 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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