

Pumpkins

Scientific Name: *Cucurbita pepo*
Irish Name: Púimcín



By Vicky West

More often than not, we think of pumpkins, or winter squash, as being large and round with smooth orange skin. However, there are about 26 different species in the squash family, producing a wide range of fruit sizes, shapes and colours. Pumpkin plants produce bright yellow male and female flowers, which are pollinated by insects, often honey-bees. Once pollinated the female flowers produce fruit that can range in size from 0.5kg to 1,054kg - the largest ever recorded pumpkin. The extra large pumpkins are the largest fruit in the plant kingdom. Pumpkins are native to North America, where they are grown commercially and are one of the most popular crops. Usually planted in early July, this warm-weather crop grows in temperatures of around 15°C and in soil which holds moisture.

Pumpkins as a food source

The pumpkin and its seeds are most commonly used as a food source and are eaten all over the world. In America pumpkins are strongly linked to Thanksgiving and are the main ingredient for pumpkin pie, a traditional dessert. The seeds are an excellent source of fat and protein for humans and are used in many forms of baking and cooking. They are also used as a dietary supplement for dogs and cats, as well as a feed for chickens and other animals.



Jack-o-lanterns & Halloween

Another well-known use of pumpkins is as Jack-o-lanterns at Halloween. The tradition of carving a pumpkin and lighting it at Halloween came about through an old Irish folktale. Irish immigrants brought the tradition to America, home of the pumpkin, and it became an integral part of Halloween festivities. Original jack-o-lanterns were carved from turnips, potatoes or beets.



Carving Pumpkins

To carve a pumpkin:

1. Cut a hole in the top of the pumpkin.
2. Scoop out the pulp and seeds.
3. Draw a design on a sheet of paper (why not use some of the tips on page 9 for facial expressions?).
4. Tape the design onto the pumpkin and transfer the outline of the design onto the pumpkin with a skewer.
5. Remove the paper and, with the help of an adult, carefully cut out the design with a small serrated knife.
6. Place a tealight into a jar and put it into the carved pumpkin. Remember to leave a hole in the lid to allow the heat escape. A safer alternative is to use a battery-operated tealight.

