IN PRAISE OF PUMPKINS

Heather Apple

In 1885, New York seedsman Peter Henderson disparagingly remarked about pumpkins:

> The pumpkin is yet offered in large quantities for sale in our markets, but it ought to be banished from them as it has been for some time from our garden. ... It will be many years yet before the masses will understand that the modest and sometimes uncouth looking squash is immeasurably superior, for all culinary purposes, to the mammoth, rotund pumpkin. The pumpkin is an excellent agricultural plant, of great value for cattle, but I have no reason to allude to it here, except to denounce its cultivation or use as a garden vegetable.

Despite the pronouncement against pumpkins by this Horticultural Worthy, I write here in praise of pumpkins. Perhaps this places me with the cattle! I love pumpkins. I celebrate pumpkins! Along with Charlie Brown, I expectantly and excitedly feel the Spirit of the Great Pumpkin moving across the land around Halloween. Bowing to the wisdom of Fairy Godmothers, I recognize the potential of pumpkins to be turned into magical crystal coaches which can transport kitchen drudges to the prince's palace. And, of course, there's the practical wisdom of Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater, who found that his difficult-to-keep wife could be kept very well in a pumpkin shell.

WHAT IS A PUMPKIN?

Pumpkins display an incredible diversity in appearance. In size, they range from the diminutive Munchkin which weighs a quarter of a pound and fits comfortably into the palm of your hand, to the monstrous Atlantic Giant which can weigh in at over 600 pounds. In colour they can be various shades of orange, red, beige, grey-blue or white. Their skin can be smooth or rough, and they can be shallowly or deeply ribbed. In shape they can be round, cylindrical, oblong or flattened.

All pumpkins don't even belong to the same species. Most of them, along with the summer squashes, are of the species Cucurbita pepo. However, the giants such as Big Max, Atlantic Giant and Big Moon, belong to the species Cucurbita maxima. I, for one, have never been able to determine exactly what it is that distinguishes pumpkins from squashes.

GROWING PUMPKINS

With our short, cool growing season, I don't know why I have to be afflicted with a passion for pumpkins rather than with an enthusiasm for something sensible such as spinach, lettuce or peas. However, pumpkins it is.

Our growing season is such that I cannot safely set out tender seedlings of squashes, tomatoes and peppers until June 1st. Some years, we never have a frost after the middle of May, but I can't depend on this. Come fall, we can have a killing frost with a full moon at the end of August or the beginning of September. On the other hand, last year we didn't have one until October 8th. In June, the nights are still cold. Vine crops tend to spend this month in a state of suspended animation. Some even suffer from deep depression. It is not until the hot days and warm nights of late June and early July that they really take off. After a brief period of enthusiastic expansion, growth slows down again towards the end of August as the nights become cool.

Each year I start my squash and pumpkin seeds later and later. I'm now at May 10th. I find that young, bushy seedlings suffer far less transplanting shock than older, longer vines. The best plants are actually those which seed

themselves in the compost pile. The second best are those summer squashes and shorter season winter squashes which I direct sow outside during the last week and a half of May.

Around May 10th, I plant my seeds in small flower pots. I used to plant them in jiffy pots, but I've found that at the time of transplanting, I can easily tap them out of their pots without disturbing their root ball. Flower pots can be used again and again, whereas jiffy pots have to be purchased each year. Pumpkin and squash seeds need warmth for good germination. I use my ingenuity to find warm niches in the house - on top of the refrigerator, above heatilators in the bathroom, on top of the TV set, and so on. As soon as the seeds sprout, I put them under grow lights and give them at least 14 hours of light a day. I keep the lights just above the young plants. This produces compact, bushy seedlings.

A week and a half before the end of May, I start to harden them off. It's a drastic change from the warmth and gentle light that they have been experiencing to the cool wind and hot, burning sun of the great world outside. I set them out in a spot which is sheltered from the wind. The first day I give them a single hour of early morning sunlight, and then I cover them with a large sheet of cheesecloth which gives them a gentle, filtered sunlight for the rest of the day. Each day I gradually increase the amount of sunlight until they are receiving a full day's worth. Each evening I listen carefully to the weather report so that I can bring them inside if frost threatens.

Finally, around June 1st, I plant them out in the garden. I try to choose a windless, slightly overcast day in order to minimize the shock of transplanting. Squash and pumpkins are greedy feeders. For each plant I dig a good-sized hole and fill it with compost or composted manure. I then mix in additional goodies such as wood ashes, kelp meal, bone meal and bloodmeal. I carefully tap the seedling out of its pot, being careful not to disturb its roots. I then set it in a bowl-shaped hollow and water it in with a weak solution of fish emulsion and liquid seaweed. The fish emulsion supplies immediate nutrients for root development and leaf growth, and the seaweed contains trace minerals and natural growth hormones. Planting each seedling in a bowl-shaped hollow is a very helpful practice. It means that all summer I can easily water the plant or give it a feeding of fish emulsion without the liquid running off all over the ground.

Because I plant so many vine crops and have such a large garden to look after, I haven't yet had the time to give special care to my young squash and pumpkin seedlings. It's something I will probably make time for in the next year or two as I start experimenting with longer season varieties. Those who pamper their vines crops during June find that their efforts are more than rewarded.

Vine crops, along with tomatoes and peppers, need warmth to grow well. Some gardeners use plastic mulches which can apparently raise the temperature of the soil by as much as 10 to 20 degrees F above the surrounding unmulched soil. The mulch also retains some of the warmth throughout the night. The really dedicated also cover each seedling with a large plastic vinegar jug, a "sun hat", a "Wall-of-Water" (both available from garden centres), or a row cover such as Reemay - anything that intensifies the warmth of the sun and maintains this warmth throughout the night. As June progresses and the days and nights get warmer, these devices can be removed. Seedlings can also be set out in portable cold frames which are removed as the seedlings outgrow them.

I recently saw slides of Patrick Lima's garden at Larkwhistle. He and John Scanlan planted a giant pumpkin seedling in the earthen floor of their sunroom. The plant spent its early days in this sheltered environment. After a few feet

of growth, it was assisted out the window and trained up the southern wall of the building. It grew vigourously, basking in the warmth of this protected southern exposure. After climbing the wall, it spread itself over the roof where it produced a huge pumpkin - like a giant orange egg laid by some monstrous bird. Clearly, the gardener's imagination is the only limitation!

Throughout the season, it is important to keep the pumpkins well watered and fed. The idea is to meet all their needs so that they grow quickly throughout the short growing season. The importance of keeping them well watered was brought home to me during the drought of last summer.

Using the technique described in our December 1988 issue, I faithfully hand pollinated my pumpkin and squash blossoms every day. I checked each pollinated flower after a week or two to see if it had set fruit. If it had, I could see a miniature pumpkin or squash starting to form. I kept a record of the number of fruits of each variety to make sure that I did enough hand pollinations of each type to supply the amount of pure seed which I needed. I did a few extras of each variety as I knew that some of these squashes and pumpkins would naturally abort during the summer.

After this initial count, I didn't check the fruit again until I harvested them in the fall. I was shocked to discover that nearly half of the fruit had aborted. I had never experienced such a loss before. I thought back to the couple of weeks when our watering system had broken down. The plants had experienced profound wilting, sometimes not even recovering during the cooler nights. Next year, even if it means carrying dozens of buckets, I'll make the extra effort to keep them well watered.

From the end of August onwards, I have a nervous time. I want to leave the pumpkins and squashes on the vines as long as possible so that they will become fully mature. This is important both for long term storage and for seed saving purposes. On the other hand, I don't want to risk a frost which might give them frost burns which could cause the fruits to rot early. I listen to weather forecasts, feel and smell the evening air, and look at the relative clarity of the atmosphere as night comes on. Many years there is a frantic last minute harvest where close to a ton of squashes and pumpkins are brought in. The squashes retire to a garage for the night and I retire, exhausted, to a hot tub!

Then the important step of curing takes place. We are blessed with a double garage which faces south. The cars are ousted for a couple of weeks while the squashes take their place. The doors are opened during the day so that the sun can toughen the skins and heal any little nicks or cracks. The fruits are turned so that all sides are exposed. This step is essential for long term storage. The squashes and pumkins then retire to their winter storage place, where the temperature is around 50 - 60 F. Unlike the root crops, they don't like it too cool.

ENJOYING PUMPKINS

As far as the culinary uses of pumpkins are concerned, I'm afraid I have to agree with Peter Henderson. I like a rich, sweet and flavourful squash, and unfortunately the pumpkins I've tried so far - with one exception - have been disappointingly bland and watery. This single exception is White Cheesequake, a flattened creamy-white heirloom which was first listed in 1824 by Throburn, a New York City seedsman. It is similar to a good winter squash with its thick orange flesh and rich taste.

Our family has a pumpkin pie which we traditionally make at Thanksgiving. Even though it has always been referred to as Granny's Pumpkin Pie, we have actually made it with hubbard squash for its richer, sweeter flavour. This year we used

a White Cheesequake Pumpkin - with excellent results.

Granny Apple's Pumpkin Pie

2 cups puréed squash or pumpkin	3/4 cup brown sugar
2 large or 3 small eggs	1 1/2 cups half and half cream
2 tbsp. molasses	1 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. ginger	1/4 tsp. nutmeg
1/4 tsp. cloves	1/4 tsp. allspice

Beat the eggs. Mix the ingredients together and pour into a pastry-lined pie plate. Cook slowly in a moderate oven (about 325 - 350 F) anywhere from 1 hr. 20 min. to 2 hr. Watch it carefully. When a silver knife is inserted and comes out clean, it is finished.

It is really for their nonculinary uses that I enjoy pumpkins so much. They have wonderful decorative potentials for Thanksgiving gatherings. Hollowed out and with a container placed inside, a pumpkin makes a beautiful vase for a bouquet of coloured leaves and autumn flowers. The hollowed out shell can also be used as a bowl for serving squash or pumpkin soup.

Most people, or course, associate pumpkins with Halloween. Imagine a pumpkin carving party where you move beyond the usual orange pumpkins sold in stores, to include flattened red Rouge d'Etampes, diminutive Munchkins, monstrous Atlantic Giants, creamy White Cheesequakes and grey Whangaparoa Crown Pumpkins.

On the back cover of the November/December 1988 issue of Fine Gardening, there is a superb picture of one of the monstrous creations of Sam Gendusa. Gendusa obtains 200 lb. to 500 lb. giant pumpkins from enthusiasts who grow them as a hobby. Then, using woodworking tools, he carves out three dimensional gargoyle-like features. For eyes, he fixes small gourds into the sockets with toothpicks. Coloured lights are beamed onto the face, and hot water is poured over a bowl of dry ice which has been placed inside the pumpkin. This results in an eerily lit, monstrous head which has clouds of steam billowing from its nostrils! (Gendusa's book, Carving Jack-o'-Lanterns, is available from him for $6.95 plus $1.50 shipping; write to P.O. Box 432, Dayton, OR 97114.)

Quite apart from all the entertaining and imaginative ways to use them, I love pumpkins just for the pure pleasure of growing them. Like zucchinis, I find them to be enthusiastic, humourous vegetables which bring fun and delight to the summer garden.

Étampes Pumpkin