

Fall is the time to think about pumpkins

By Mollie Moore

As the weather becomes colder, leaves start to change and summer turns into fall, our attention goes from summer to fall activities. People start to think about pumpkins. Many consumers only know that they are orange, round and fun to carve. They do not realize that there is so much more to the pumpkin.

Pumpkins are in the genus *Cucurbita* of the family *Cucurbitaceae*. This genus consists of vines with yellow to orange flowers, large leaves and long twisting tendrils. The family *Cucurbitaceae* also includes squash, watermelons and cucumbers. There are four species of pumpkins, *Cucurbita maxima*, *Cucurbita mixta*, *Cucurbita moschata* and *Cucurbita pepo* and there are many varieties in each species.

Cucurbita maxima is the monster of the pumpkin world because it contains some of the biggest varieties of pumpkins, including those grown for weigh-off competitions. This species also includes most winter squash, hubbard squash, banana squash and buttercup squash.

Cucurbita mixta are small and very colorful pumpkins. These pumpkins make interesting decorations for the fall holidays

Garden Tales



Submitted sketch/Katie Yost

Pumpkins (*Cucurbita* spp.) are colorful symbols of autumn.

and are used in arts and crafts projects.

Cucurbita moschata are the pumpkins that are often used for pumpkin pie filling.

Cucurbita pepo includes the very famil-

iar field pumpkins, and also some of the most common squash that is found in the produce aisle such as acorn squash, spa-

seeds contain amino acids that may act as natural de-wormers and colon cleansers for livestock.

Pumpkins like warm growing temperatures and lots of sun. Seeds sprout in four to seven days, and can be soaked overnight before planting, or started indoors 2-3 weeks earlier. A pumpkin vine can grow up to six inches per day and reach up to 30 feet in length. The first flowers appear about ten weeks after planting, and each bloom only lasts for one day.

Male flowers appear first on long stems, while female blooms sit closer to the plant. Bees are essential for pollination. Many pumpkins require 110 to 140 frost-free days to reach mature development.

Some pests that affect pumpkins are squash bugs, squash vine borers, cucumber beetles, and aphids; and diseases include powdery mildew, mosaic virus, and Verticillium wilt.

From large pumpkins that we form into jack-o-lanterns, to miniatures that little ones carry around, the variety in pumpkins is astonishing. Chances are that you will never look at a pumpkin in the same way again.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

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ghetti squash, yellow crookneck squash, yellow summer squash and zucchini.

Pumpkins are a big business in the United States, with about 1.5 billion pounds, worth over \$100 million, sold annually. Most were for Halloween decorations such as jack-o-lanterns, with the second largest percentage used for food. This year, because of Hurricane Irene, pumpkins may be in short supply and cost more in the Northeast.

The word pumpkin is derived from the Greek word pepon, meaning large melon. In 1547 the English termed it pumpkin or pompion. Scientists are uncertain of the origin of the pumpkin, but seeds from related plants in Mexico date back to 7000 to 5500 B.C. Pumpkin was a staple in Native American diets for centuries. When settlers came to North America, they were introduced to the Native American pumpkin, and used it in a variety of recipes from deserts to soups and stews.

One early recipe was to cut off the top of a pumpkin; fill it with milk, spices and honey; bake it in a fire, and eat it.

People do not consume pumpkins like they did in colonial days, but pumpkins are still a part of the American diet. Foods that contain pumpkin are desserts, breads, some soups, ale, and some trail mixes. Scientific evidence indicates that pumpkin