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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Where’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown?”

One of the surest signs that fall is upon us is the appearance of pumpkins for sale along the roadside. If the pumpkins are ready for harvest, the frost upon them can't be far behind. The search for the perfect pumpkin has become almost as important as scouring the woods for the perfect Christmas tree. Pumpkins come in many shapes and sizes, and people's preferences vary.

The miniature has become popular among those who dabble in decorative design. The giant is a challenge for the competitive at heart. The pie pumpkin, usually 3 to 6 pounds, is the culinary choice. And the jack-o'-lantern types are a cut above for those who like to carve.

So where do we find the one “Great Pumpkin” that will satisfy our own holiday desires? Linus waited in the pumpkin patch each year for the Great Pumpkin. This course of action may only lead, however, to frustration and frostbite.

The best pumpkin may only be an afternoon's drive away. Or it could be waiting at the local supermarket. Many roadside markets, produce stands, and local grocers offer pumpkins. A growing number of local farms, too, offer hayrides to the field and let customers pick their own pumpkins. This is akin to the stroll in the forest looking for the right Christmas tree or the Thanksgiving morning turkey hunt for the day's main course.

Just don't expect to always find a locally grown pumpkin. Georgia farmers grow only about 600 acres of them each year, although that figure has been rising. Most of the pumpkins grown in Georgia are in the northern third of the state, although there are a few South Georgia growers. Plant viruses and insect pressure have traditionally made growing pumpkins in South Georgia hard to do. However, in recent years, new varieties developed by the University of Georgia show promise for disease resistance in South Georgia.

Many of the pumpkins actually sold in Georgia were grown up north and in the Midwest. Some come from states such as Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Michigan and North Carolina. Don't give up hope, though, for just the right local pumpkin. Your chances of finding it are better if you search local markets and on-farm sales outlets.

Then, of course, there's always the challenge of growing your own. This is often not practical. But if you have a big yard and don't mind filling some of it with vines, give it a whirl. For harvest near Halloween or Thanksgiving, don't plant pumpkins until early to late June, depending on the variety. Never plant until danger of frost has passed in spring. Pumpkin varieties vary in size and color. To grow your own, start by selecting the right variety for your use.

It takes proper care throughout the season to grow the long-awaited Big Orange Orb you will cherish until it's ladled into the pie crust or melts into the compost pile. If you decide to grow your own, check out this Extension publication online: *Production and Management of Pumpkins and Gourds*, Bulletin 1180. You can access this publication for free from our website: www.caes.uga.edu/publications. Don't expect to break the world record (more than 1,000 pounds). It's virtually impossible to grow competitively large pumpkins in Georgia's climate. Limit your competition to local and state fairs.

The pumpkin is a true American vegetable. It originated in the Americas and still holds a fond place in our hearts. Whether in the backyard or in uncharted fields, our search for the Great Pumpkin will always be a yearly delight.

So how do you pick the proper pumpkin? Plant doctors with The American Phytopathological Society (APS) suggest the following tips to help you select a healthy Halloween pumpkin:

- Visually check for moldy areas or soft spots on the fruit (remember to check the bottom). Choose one with a hard rind.
- Check the stem attachment; healthy stems are green in color. A good stem will support the weight of the fruit. Declining vines leading to healthy stems indicate a ripe pumpkin, too.
- Most pumpkin varieties are a dull to bright orange when mature. A yellow pumpkin may not be completely mature.
- If possible, keep your pumpkin in a dry, shady place and try to prevent it from freezing. This should increase the 'porch life' of your pumpkin.
- Once pumpkins are carved, the process of decay will become more rapid. To help insure that a Jack-o-Lantern lasts through Halloween, don't carve it until a few days before the event.
- Pick pumpkins before frost and leave at least 3 to 4 inches of stem on the fruit.
- One caution: Southern-grown pumpkins usually can't be stored as long as those grown in other areas.

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