

Jack-o'-Lanterns

By Claudia Wells
November 12, 2021



A treat for 2020

Once you read this article you will be set to grow pumpkins to make your Jack-o'-lanterns next year.

Decide where you want to plant your pumpkins. They need 6-8 hours of sun every day. If not, the pumpkins will not have a chance to mature fully. Because pumpkins are heavy feeders, prepare the soil now for planting next spring. Add in roughly equal parts compost and manure to your native soil. Pumpkins require light soil and good drainage. They will not do well with heavy, clay-like soil.

How large is the area you have designated for your pumpkin patch? Pumpkin vines will grow from here to New York and back if you let them. For a smaller yard, use a trellis. When the fruit is small, place it in a sling/bag and attach it well to the trellis. If you are only growing pumpkins to carve, then you only want a few and you can pinch the vine at the end so it will not grow so long. Pinch off the smaller pumpkins so that all the energy will be going to grow a few large, Jack-o'-lantern-sized pumpkins that will mature in October.

Purchase your pumpkin/Jack-o'-lantern seeds and read the labels carefully. Pay particular attention to "dates to maturity." This is an indicator of when the pumpkins will be ready to harvest.

In the spring when the soil is not too wet, work in more rotted manure and compost. Let the area rest for a week or so before seeding. The soil needs to be warm, preferably 50+ degrees Fahrenheit. In Skagit County, that typically occurs somewhere between mid-May to mid-June. (To check soil temperature, insert a thermometer into your pumpkin patch soil to a depth of about 2 inches for about 2 minutes.)

Protect the plants from frost, but especially when they are very young and prone to extremes in temperature. Cover the entire pumpkin patch area with black plastic about a week before planting the seedlings or direct seeding. Since the nights are cooler and we might have late frosts, it is usually best to sow the seeds inside about two weeks prior to your target transplant time. When you are ready to plant, simply cut a small X in the plastic and plant the seeds, or seedlings if started indoors. Do not remove the plastic. It will keep the ground warmer and cut down on any weeds. Place the cuts into long rows so that water can get underneath it to reach the plants.



A home fall pumpkin display. Most of these were home-grown in the garden. Photo by Sue Moulton / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Space plants in mounds about 5 feet apart to accommodate the aggressive vines. If you choose to use a trellis, make sure your slings are heavy duty to support the pumpkins as they ripen. Look on the web to find many ideas about building your own trellis.

To prevent rot, make sure to lift the pumpkins off the ground as they are forming—something as simple as thick cardboard or a cottage cheese-type container turned upside down. You want as much sun as possible on the pumpkin so get those leaves off the pumpkin itself and out of the way by trimming or pinching them off.

Lots of water is a must for the pumpkins to ripen. Options to provide the water might be a drip irrigation system, an ordinary garden hose allowed to soak the ground, or a soaker hose. Do not water overhead as the leaves should be kept as dry as possible. Try to water in the morning whenever possible so that if any foliage does become wet it will have the day to dry out. Powdery mildew and downy mildew are often the reason the vines wither and are unable to produce. Wet leaves are a major contributor to their formation.

If your goal is large-sized pumpkins, then you will want to have fewer pumpkins on your vine. This will make all the nutrition be focused on just a few. To accomplish this, pinch off the remaining flowers from the vine once you have three to four pumpkins growing.

For harvest, your pumpkins should all be a deep color with a firm rind. Check to see that when you press in with your nail there is no denting or scratching. Pumpkins should be harvested before the first hard freeze (temperatures between 25-28 degrees F). A light freeze (29-32 degrees F) may kill the vine but should not hurt the fruit. When you are ready to harvest your pumpkins, use pruning shears or any other sharp utensil to cut the fruit from the vine leaving at least 3 inches of the stem attached. The pumpkin will be heavy so never pick it up by the stem or it may crack.

If you plan to store your pumpkins for several months, they will need to be cured for 8-10 days right after harvesting. Curing needs to take place in an area with a temperature of 80-85 degrees Fahrenheit. Once the curing process is over, the pumpkins should be stored in a cool dry place. The ideal temperature should be in the mid 50's. They should be stored in a single layer and not touching each other. If the pumpkins touch or are stacked on top of each other, there will not be enough air circulation for the fruit, and it will produce excess heat that promotes decay. In adequate storage conditions, your prize pumpkins should last a minimum of two to three months.

While pumpkins are small and skins are soft, scratch a child's name into the skin. The name is supposed to get bigger as the pumpkin grows. Wouldn't any child (or adult with a child's heart) be excited to watch their name emerge onto a growing pumpkin?

RESOURCES

- www.almanac.com
- "11 Tips for Growing Pumpkins." Mike's Backyard Nursery
- bonnieplants.com/how-to-grow/growing-pumpkins/