

## Pumpkin Carving



The leaves are falling, the days are getting shorter and there is a definite chill in the air. This could only mean one thing. Halloween is just around the corner! Are you looking for something different to do this year to spice up your Halloween? Well, how about some new tricks and some great treats to perfect your pumpkin carving skills?

Halloween is that time of year when the young and the young-at-heart get to show off their artistic talent of pumpkin carving. For most of us Halloween is a magic night for dressing up in fun costumes, trick or treating and pumpkins. But did you know that Halloween is actually based on an ancient Celtic holiday know as Samhain (pronounced "sow wan"), which means "summer's end?" Starting at sundown on

October 31st and ending at sundown on November 1st, it was celebrated as the end of the Celtic year. Traditionally it was a night to honor loved ones that had passed on. Celebrated by the Celts of old, witches, and other religions, it is truly the most magical night of the year and the last harvest. On this magical night, glowing jack-o-lanterns, carved from turnips or gourds, were set on porches and in windows to welcome deceased loved ones, and also for protection against evil spirits. Burning lumps of coal were used inside as a light source, where today we use candles. When European settlers arrived in America they found the pumpkin to be larger and easier to carve, and it has since become our choice for jack-o-lanterns.

What's the first step to creative pumpkin carving? Well, let's start by picking out that perfect pumpkin. It helps if you know in advance what type of design you will be carving on it. Medium size pumpkins work best for most stencils. Great big pumpkins can be used for elaborate designs. Small pumpkins are great for carving traditional designs, and are usually quick to do, especially if you need to do several. Look for pumpkins that have a sturdy stem and are free from bruises, soft spots, or gouges. Pumpkins that are flat and don't roll work best, however, the shape can be whatever is appealing to you. Some of the best-carved jack-o-lanterns start from very misshapen pumpkins.

If you find the perfect pumpkin, but the stem is missing, you can still use it. Just carve it open from the bottom, instead of the top. Set your candle on the cleaned bottom piece, and place the carved pumpkin on top.

To make carving easier, you need the right tools, most of which you probably already have. Make sure your tools are sturdy, thin, and sharp. These are some of the tools you might want to consider using:

- Boning knife-good for cutting the top and larger pieces
- Small paring knife or X-acto knife-for detail work
- Mini hand held saw-good for small areas, or for the whole pumpkin
- Poker tool-such as an ice pick, nail or stylus
- Gutting spoons-an old ice cream scoop works great, or a sturdy metal ladle

- Patterns-download on computer, or design your own
- Masking tape-for attaching pattern to pumpkin
- Crayon or washable pen
- Candles and holders
- Other tools to consider: drill, saws of different lengths, pushpins or thumbtacks

Before you can start carving your pumpkin, you must cut it open and remove the seeds and inner membranes. Save the seeds if you want to make roasted pumpkin seeds (recipe to follow). How you access your pumpkin is totally up to you. You can cut into the top or the bottom, or for a different look, turn the pumpkin on its side. Using the stem for a nose, carve out the other facial features. For bottom cutting, cut a small hole in the bottom, discard the cut portion, and when finished just set your pumpkin right over the candle. If you choose to cut from the top, do not cut in a circle or the top will fall through when you put the lid on. Instead, cut in a jagged way or hexagon, and cut at an angle, so it creates a small ledge for the lid to rest on. Once you have cut into your pumpkin, remove the insides and scrape away at the pumpkin until the walls are no more than one-inch thick. Some designs may require scraping away even more.



The traditional way to carve a pumpkin is freehand. It's very easy and takes just a few tools. You can pre-mark your design by using a crayon or washable pen.

If you're using a pattern for your pumpkin, take care where you place it. The pattern should be towards the top of the pumpkin, not in the center. The light source should be below the pattern to allow the light to project upward. Attach your pattern with masking tape. Use a nail, ice pick, or other sharp pointed object to transfer the pattern onto the face of the pumpkin. Press the tip through the design lines on the paper about 1/8 inch apart. The tip should be pushed in far enough to go through the paper and the outer skin of the pumpkin. It is not necessary at this time to go all the way through the pumpkin. Take your time when transferring the pattern, as it is the guideline for sawing. Once the paper is removed, look it over carefully to make sure that all lines have been transferred clearly. If you're having trouble seeing some of the lines, rub some flour or baking soda over the lines and they will stand out better. Remember, your saw is not a knife, don't cut with it. Saw slowly and gently. Start at the center of the design and work your way outward. Each time you remove a piece of the design the pumpkin gets weaker. Leave large pieces in until the end, so that your pumpkin's facial surface doesn't get weak while sawing other areas. Leave plenty of connective tissue. Accidents can happen to anyone, so if something does fall off, just put a couple of toothpicks into the area that broke off, then carefully push it back into place. Slide the piece on in the direction of the toothpicks so the final alignment will be correct.

The following websites offer stencils and patterns, many of them free:

- [The Pumpkin Wizard](#)
- [Pumpkin Nook](#)



Now that you've carved your masterpiece, you'll want to keep it fresh as long as possible. When pumpkins shrivel up, it's because they have lost moisture. You can usually restore them to their original condition by soaking them in water overnight. Another technique is to coat all cut surfaces with petroleum jelly immediately after carving, including the entire inside of the pumpkin. The petroleum jelly acts as a barrier to seal in the internal moisture to help slow down the dehydration process.

The final step is to add a candle. Candles placed in glass candleholders are safer and last longer. Small glass jelly jars make excellent candleholders. Plain white candles give off the most light. If the lid of your pumpkin blackens, cut a small chimney hole in the top, so heat and smoke can escape.

While most people usually buy their pumpkins, some actually grow their own. They are relatively easy to grow. They like at least six hours of sunlight each day, and require four to five months of frost-free growing days to reach maturity. Plant your seeds when the temperatures consistently reach the low 70's during the day, usually in late May. A single vine can grow as long as 25 feet so make sure you give them plenty of growing space. Plant four or five seeds in a mound, about 3 feet in diameter and 10 feet away from other mounds. Surround each mound with a six-inch wide by six-inch deep moat to help hold water around the plant roots. Pumpkins need lots of indirect water, but keep the soil on the mound moist, not wet. Seeds should sprout in 7 to 14 days. About two weeks after the seeds have sprouted, you should thin them out. Pull out all except two or three of the healthiest and largest plants on each mound. If by the time a pumpkin has grown to the size of a grapefruit and looks unhealthy or shriveled, it should be removed. This will allow the healthier pumpkins to get more water and nourishment. To help encourage the "rounded" pumpkin, wait until the pumpkin is at least a month old, then very carefully lift the stem and vine in one hand and the pumpkin in the other and adjust it so that the bottom sits flat on the ground or on a thin piece of wood. Your pumpkins will be ready to harvest once the color of the fruit has developed into a deep orange. When you cut the pumpkin be sure to leave several inches of stem, and it will stay fresh longer.

#### Roasted Pumpkin Seeds

- 1½ cups pumpkin seeds
- 2 tsp. Melted butter or olive oil
- Salt to taste

Options:

- Garlic powder
- Cayenne powder
- Seasoning salt
- Cajun seasoning

Preheat oven to 300 degrees F.

Clean off any major chunks on the seeds; some strings and pulp are okay, they add flavor.

Toss pumpkin seeds in a bowl with the melted butter or oil and seasonings of your choice. Spread seeds in a single layer on a baking sheet. Bake for about 45 minutes, stirring occasionally, until golden brown.

These are rich in fiber and high in vitamins B and E. Enjoy!

## References

Sunset Magazine, October 2001

Spookmaster

[FabulousFoods.com](http://FabulousFoods.com)

Walt's Pumpkin Carving Secrets

[Ehow.com](http://Ehow.com)



What do you get  
when you take the  
circumference of a  
pumpkin and divide  
it by its diameter?  
Pumpkin Pi