

Storing Pumpkins

By Nancy Benthin, Master Gardener

Pumpkins belong to the *Curcubitaceae* family. The various sized orange fruit, which grows on coarse trailing vines, belongs to four species in the genus *Cucurbita*. Pumpkin is native to the warmer parts of America and pumpkin seeds dating back to 7000–5500 BC have been found in Mexico. Today pumpkins are grown throughout the world. Best known for jack-o'-lanterns and pumpkin pie, pumpkin pulp can also be used in breads, soups, desserts, salads, stews, beverages, and more.

Cooked pumpkin is very low in calories, but is rich in vitamin A, vitamin C, and potassium. Pumpkin seeds are high in phosphorous and potassium and also include protein, iron, zinc, and vitamin A. So wouldn't it be great if you could enjoy those pumpkins from your garden for several months? It is, and I'll tell you how.

Pumpkins in the home garden are ready to pick when they reach a full color, lose their surface shine, and the tendril nearest the fruit dies back. The skin (or rind) on a mature pumpkin is hard enough that you cannot scratch it with your fingernail. With a sharp knife, cut the stem leaving 3 to 4 inches on the pumpkin, but never pick up the pumpkin by the stem. Wash and dry the pumpkin completely. You can also wipe the pumpkin with a thin chlorine bleach solution to reduce rotting. Make the solution with 1–2 tablespoons of chlorine bleach to each gallon of water.

Always pick pumpkins before the first frost. If you must pick your pumpkins before they are completely cured (the rind is not hard), or you are uncertain if they are completely cured, artificial curing is necessary. Put the pumpkins in an area that is between 80° F and 85° F for 10 days. You can leave them in full sun during this time. The rind will harden and cuts and scratches will heal.

Now the pumpkins are ready for storage. Store them in one layer, if possible, on shelves, cardboard, hay, or hanging in mesh sacks. Never store directly on concrete since this will cause rotting. The storage area should be between 50° F and 60° F, dry, and preferably dark. If it is less than 50° F, chilling damage may occur, and if more than 60° F, the pumpkin will become stringy. Check the pumpkins occasionally and remove any that have started to rot. Clean and thoroughly dry any pumpkins that were in contact with a moldy one. Properly stored pumpkins will keep a minimum of 3 months and as long as 5–7 months.

You can also preserve pumpkin by freezing, pressure canning, or drying. To freeze, first cook and puree the pumpkin. Freeze in the quantity needed for a pie or another favorite recipe. Pumpkin cubes can be pressure canned, and slices can be dried in a food dehydrator to use later in soup, pies, or as delicious pumpkin chips.

While processing a pumpkin, now or later, don't forget the seeds! You can substitute pumpkin seeds (called pepitas) for sunflower seeds in a recipe or eat them as a nutritious snack. Follow these steps to make your own roasted pepitas after you have cleaned out a pumpkin. Remove the seeds from the pulp and fiber, wash, and dry on a paper towel for a day. Mix together 1 tablespoon vegetable oil to every 2 cups of seeds and toss until seeds are coated. Spread on a cookie sheet and add salt or other seasonings as desired. Bake the seeds at 300° F for

about 45 minutes or until lightly browned, stirring every 10–15 minutes. Cool and store in an airtight container. Enjoy!

References

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