

The Great Pumpkin Story

Pumpkins are not vegetables... they're fruits!

Pumpkins, gourds, and other varieties of squash are all members of the family Cucurbitaceae, which also includes cucumbers, gherkins, and melons.

Pumpkins have been grown in America for over 5,000 years. They are indigenous to the western hemisphere and were completely unknown in Europe before the time of Columbus.

There was probably some kind of pumpkin served at the first Thanksgiving Day feast. Pumpkins and other forms of squash were an important component of the Native American diet along with maize and beans. Pumpkins plants have long, sprawling vines that cover the ground. Pumpkin seeds are planted sometime between the last week of May and the middle of June. After seeds are planted, they will sprout (germinate) in seven to ten days, depending on the variety. During this time, seeds need moisture and warmth. Once seeds have germinated, they will send up their first leaves, called seed leaves (or cotyledons).

Next, the true leaves will appear. Yellow flowers begin to appear after the first three weeks of growth.

Male flowers, which produce pollen, are seen first.

About a week later, the female flowers bloom. Female flowers are easy to spot because each will have a tiny pumpkin at its base. Flowers bloom for less than a day and will not open in cold, rainy weather, but each plant will produce many flowers. When both male and female flowers bloom, bees transfer the pollen from the males to the females—this is called pollination.

Once pollinated, the fruit at the base of the female flower develops into a full-sized pumpkin. During this time, the plant continues to flower, and many pumpkins will form on a single plant. The pumpkin contains seeds that can be saved to grow new pumpkins the following year. While growing, pumpkins require a lot of moisture and sunlight. It takes about 90–120 days after planting for a pumpkin to reach its full size. Pumpkins are picked in October when they turn bright orange.

Pumpkins are a good source of nutrition. They are high in fiber and low in calories, fat, and sodium. They are loaded with vitamins A and B and potassium. The seeds are very high in protein and are an excellent source of B vitamins.

