

## **Pumpkins, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015**

It's somewhat difficult to come up with a backyard garden crop more a part of American culture than that plump, round, ribbed, vining fruit that we look forward to honoring every fall. Of course, corn makes the world go 'round — but not sweet corn like you find in the typical backyard garden. Americans also consume about a potato per day on average. And who doesn't like green beans? Yet all those backyard crops take a backseat each fall as families head into the pumpkin patch, gather around the picnic table to carve jack-o'-lanterns, and in the end enjoy a delicious squash pie at Thanksgiving. Wait ... squash?

The simplest maxim is all pumpkin varieties are [squash](#), but not all squash are pumpkins. So what is a pumpkin, and why do we care? Botanists call one particular group of squash, which belongs to one particular species, pumpkins. The species, *Cucurbita pepo*, differs from all other species of squash in certain characteristics, such as its leaves and stem. The classic orange fruit, whether big or small, round or oblong, is what botanists routinely agree is a pumpkin. Not everyone else, though, is on the same page. Let's try and get to the bottom of it, shall we?

Pepo squashes include pattypan, zucchini (var. *fastigata*) and yellow summer squash, the winter varieties of acorn (var. *turbinata*), pumpkin (var. *pepo*) and spaghetti squash, and others. One difference between summer and winter squashes is that we eat summer squash before seeds have hardened and the fruit has ripened, while we eat winter squash only after the fruit has matured.

### **Domesticated Squash**

Let's wind back thousands of years. Some 8,000 to 10,000 years ago, clever Native Americans domesticated pepo squash from wild [gourds](#) in Mexico. What these squash were really like is unclear, but they may have been cultivated only for their seeds at first and, in some cases, for their hard shells. What we do know is that these first domesticated fruits contained the distinctive orange pigmentation of true pumpkins.

Fast forward four or five thousand years to eastern North America, where a second group of Native Americans domesticated another gourd — the Ozark Wild Gourd — and created a whole new line of pepo squashes, possessing green, white, and yellow skin colors and a vast array of fruit types. These all had, and still have, the ability to cross pollinate with each other. *Cucurbita pepo* is one of the most variable species in the world for fruit shape. If you let your zucchini cross pollinate with your acorn squash and grow out the seeds, you'll see what I mean.

By the time Columbus came to America, native agriculture was in full swing, including the extensive cultivation of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and Jerusalem artichokes in the eastern section of the continent. The squash species in the northeast was primarily pepo, with some cultivation of *C. argyrosperma* in the more southwestern reaches of eastern America. The pepos had a wide array of fruit types, including what we typically call gourds, similar to the types

grown today for Halloween. There were also varieties of summer squash of the [pattypan type](#), acorn squash and orange pumpkins.

### Only Orange?

How botanists came to call only the orange fruit “pumpkins” is tied up in history and etymology, and not all of it is clear. *Pepo*, the species name of pumpkins, also refers to the botanical name of the fruit of all cucurbits, including squash. In Greek, *pepon* refers to a sun-ripened or “cooked” fruit, which at that time meant Old World watermelon and melons, and in Latin that became *peponem* or *pepo*. In middle French, this became *pompon*, and in English *pompion*, then *pumpion*, and eventually *pumpkin* or *punkin*. A 19th-century writer speculated the word came from “pump” since growers pumped so much water to grow pumpkins.

The term *pompion* was applied to the Indian pepo squashes beginning in the early 16th century. Orange pumpkins were one of the first fruits encountered by explorers and settlers in the New World.

Over time, though, the term *pepo* and *pompion* became closely associated with the pepo squash group and pumpkins. The term *pompion* was used continually in describing the pepo squashes in North America and northern Europe, although on some occasions it might also refer to melon, watermelon or even a true gourd (*Lagenaria*).

While botanists stick close to the original application of the word to describe those ribbed orange fruits, the public does not, and hence the term has been applied to a wide variety of squash.

The most obvious use of the term *pumpkin* applied to a non-pepo squash is the so-called Cinderella Pumpkin of the pumpkin varieties, otherwise known as Rouge vif d’Etampes, which is a maxima squash. The *Cucurbita maxima* species originated in South America. The Cinderella Pumpkin is a large, strongly ribbed reddish-orange flattened squash, vaguely resembling the classic orange pumpkin. It was cultivated in France and introduced in 1883 to the United States. The fruit can weigh up to 35 pounds, and the flesh is thick with good taste. Some claim this is the authentic Cinderella pumpkin. But in the fairy tale popularized by Charles Perrault in 1697, he added to the original story that the carriage turned into a “golden pumpkin,” which seems closer to the bright orange of true pumpkins. According to his version, “Her godmother scooped out all the inside of it, having left nothing but the rind,” which again sounds like a traditional carving pumpkin rather than a thick-fleshed maxima squash.

Another orange-skinned maxima variety is Mammoth — also known as Mammoth King Pumpkin, Jumbo Pumpkin, Giant Pumpkin and other names. It was known by 1834, and is the largest of the American pumpkin varieties, sometimes weighing more than 50 pounds. It is globe shaped with orange skin, thick flesh and buff stripes, vaguely resembling a true pumpkin. The quality was not good, so it was used exclusively as cattle feed. It may have been the leading variety for which the terms squash and pumpkin were used interchangeably.

Mammoth was also known as Potiron, the name of a French variety Potiron Jaune Gros de Paris, which commonly reached 50 to several hundred pounds. While this variety may have been synonymous with Mammoth, it seems more likely to be a close relative. There were a number of

variations of this squash with skin ranging from yellow to salmon color, with the rind relatively smooth to ribbed. First documented in the 1850s in Europe, it was originally grown in the United States by Henry David Thoreau, who obtained seeds from the U.S. Patent office in 1857.

During the last few decades, the name pumpkin has been affixed to an offspring of the Potiron, the Atlantic Giant Pumpkin, bred by Howard Dill, which has produced record-breaking squash, with specimens currently reaching the 2,000-pound range. Giant pumpkin contests are common throughout the country, and this usage of pumpkin has surely added to present-day confusion in terminology.

Many other maxima squash may be called pumpkins depending on which seed catalog you are reading.

### **Moschatas**

Cheese Pumpkins are large, round, flattened, tan-colored squash, which were cultivated in Colonial times and first offered commercially by Bernard McMahon in 1807. They belong to the *Cucurbita moschata* species, whose ancestors originated in northern South America or Central America about 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. Butternut is probably the most well-known representative of this species. A number of variations of the Cheese squash exist, although all are fairly similar with prominent ribs weighing about 6 to 12 pounds. Long Island Cheese is one variety commonly available, which vaguely resembles the Cinderella Pumpkin. These squash taste fairly good, although they tend to be a bit stringy.

Another member of this species is the Dickinson Field Pumpkin, a variety originating in the Southeast around 1835 and brought north to Illinois by Elijah Dickinson. This is an oblong ribbed squash weighing 30 to 40 pounds with smooth, thick flesh. Dickinson is the squash most of us consume in pies and other products since most of the U.S. production of “pumpkin” filling is from this variety.

The Long Neck Pumpkin, also a moschata, is sort of a giant butternut with a prominent elongated and often curving neck. Unlike the aforementioned varieties, this one doesn’t even vaguely resemble a pumpkin. As with the Dickinson Field Pumpkin, it may have gotten its name because it was supposedly used by the Amish in Pennsylvania to make pies. The flesh is thick, smooth and tasty.

Pumpkin is also a name applied to a fourth species of squash, *Cucurbita argyosperma*. These are the [cushaws](#), or cashaws, and are represented by varieties such as Green-Striped, Tennessee Sweet Potato, Golden Cushaw and forms of White Cushaw. These were used for pies in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and sometimes had “pumpkin” affixed to their name or were considered pumpkins in catalogs and cookbooks. Having never grown these in a hot climate, I cannot vouch for their quality; the specimens I have grown would have made a poor pie as they were relatively watery and tasteless.

Whether you call a pumpkin a pumpkin, a squash a pumpkin, or a squash a squash, just remember that most of your fellow citizens have probably never tasted a real pumpkin pie. If you want to try a “pepo pumpkin” this fall, reach for heirlooms such as Connecticut Field, New

England Sugar Pie and Winter Luxury, as well as modern pumpkin varieties such as Howden, Spookie — also known as Spookie Pie or Deep Sugar Pie — and others.

So, there you have it. Around the holidays, when you reach for that slice of “pumpkin” pie and casually ask, “Is this a pepo pumpkin?” — just know the conversation could get a little hairy.