Pumpkins

From Summer Heat to Fall Porch: A Texas Guide to Growing Your Own Pumpkins



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Pumpkins are a fall harvest, but they are very much a summer crop. If you want pumpkins on your porch in October, seeds need to go in the ground in June or July. Miss that window and you're buying from a pumpkin patch instead of harvesting from your own.

Texas has historically ranked as one of the top producing pumpkin states, with 5,000 to 8,000 acres planted annually for commercial use. This guide is written for home garden growers and not commercial operations, but the fundamentals are the same. Growing pumpkins in Texas takes a different approach than what you'll find in most national gardening guides. The challenge isn't cold. It's heat, humidity, and getting your timing right in one of the hottest and most unpredictable climates in the country.

The pumpkin vines in the photo above are growing at our place in Chappell Hill, Washington County, roughly 2,500 square feet planted with a mix of carving, decorative, and eating varieties. This guide draws from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension research, applied to what I've learned growing this patch.

Here's what you need to know.

What This Article Covers

- Ideal planting dates for Texas (different than much of the rest of the country)
- Which varieties to grow, organized by size, with notes on carving, decorating, and eating
- Growing basics: soil, sun, space, and fertilizer
- How to protect your crop from the biggest Texas threats
- How to harvest and store your pumpkins

Ideal Planting Dates for Texas

Pumpkins need roughly 90 to 120 days to mature, depending on the variety. In Texas, that means planting in the heat of the summer to hit your October harvest target. The exact date you plant depends on which variety you choose. A 90-day variety and a 120-day variety are not going in the ground on the same day. Check the days-to-maturity on your seed packet, then work forward from your planting date to ensure you reach harvest before your target timeline. Pumpkins are a frost sensitive crop (they will be injured or killed by temperatures below 32 degrees F), so growing will need to be completed prior to the first frost.

Texas is divided into five planting regions. See below for a general planting window as a starting point:

Region	Average Planting Date
Region I (North Texas/Panhandle)	June 1
Region II (Central Texas/Brazos Valley)	July 1
Region III (San Antonio/Austin corridor)	August 1
Region IV (Houston area)	August 10
Region V (South Texas/Rio Grande Valley)	September 1

Use these windows as a baseline, then adjust based on your specific variety's days-to-maturity. A shorter-season variety gives you a little flexibility; a longer-season variety needs to go in on the earlier end.

Pick Your Variety

Not all pumpkins are the same, and variety selection matters more in Texas than in cooler climates because heat tolerance and days-to-maturity vary significantly between types.

Texas A&M AgriLife recommends the following varieties for Texas gardens, organized by size:

Large

- **Big Max**: Primarily decorative. Can reach 50 to 100+ pounds, making it a showstopper for fall displays and size contests. Too large and watery for practical cooking, though technically edible.
- **Connecticut Field**: Primarily carving. A classic American carving pumpkin, weighing 15 to 25 pounds. An heirloom variety with a classic shape and also edible.

Medium

- **Bumpkin**: Primarily decorative. A compact, high-yield miniature variety with dark orange color. Good for fall arrangements.
- **Howden**: Primarily carving. A great choice for a classic jack-o'-lantern pumpkin. Uniform, deep orange, and reliable. Weighs 15 to 25 pounds.
- **Jack O'Lantern**: Primarily carving. Also a Halloween pumpkin, weighing 9 to 16 pounds. Easy to carve and widely available.

Small

- **Jack-Be-Little**: Primarily decorative, but also a good eating variety. Palm-sized with sweet, smooth flesh that works well for stuffing and roasting. A reliable producer that handles Texas summers well.
- **Lady Godiva**: Primarily grown for eating the seeds. A hull-less (naked seed) variety, meaning the seeds grow naturally without a hard, white outer shell. The flesh is stringy and not recommended for cooking.
- **Munchkin**: Primarily decorative. Uniform, attractive miniature pumpkins that are ideal for fall arrangements and tabletop displays.

For most home gardeners, one variety from each size category covers carving, decorating, and eating without overcomplicating the patch.



Growing Basics

Spacing: Pumpkins are not a small-garden crop. Vines on standard varieties will run 8 to 15 feet in every direction, and some varieties can exceed that. We underestimated this our first year and the vines crossed the footpath before we knew it.

Sun: Pumpkins need a minimum of 8 hours of direct sun daily.

Soil: Well-drained soil is essential. Before planting, work 2 to 3 inches of organic material (such as compost) into the top 8 to 10 inches of soil. A soil pH between 6.0 and 6.5 is ideal.

Planting: Direct seed into the garden. Plant in hills (a slightly raised mound of soil) that are ~4 feet apart, on rows that are 3 to 8 feet apart. Place 5 to 6 seeds per hill about 1 inch deep, then thin to the 3 strongest plants once they're established.

Fertilizing: A soil test before planting is the best way to know exactly what your soil needs. Texas A&M offers soil testing through their lab at soiltesting.tamu.edu. If you haven't tested, the general guidance is to incorporate 2 to 3 pounds of a complete fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) per 100 square feet before planting. When the first pumpkin blooms appear, side-dress with an additional 2 tablespoons of fertilizer per hill to support growth.

Pollination: Pumpkins require bees for pollination. They produce separate male and female flowers, and pollinating insects must transfer pollen from the male to the female flowers for fruit to set. Wet, cloudy conditions that slow insect activity can reduce fruit set.





Keeping Them Alive Through a Texas Summer

This is where most home growers struggle. Pumpkins are a warm-season crop, but surviving a Texas summer requires managing extreme heat, humidity, and pests in one of the hottest, most humid, and unpredictable climates in the country. A few key threats will test you:

Squash Vine Borer: The adult moth lays eggs at the base of the vine, then larvae tunnel inside and kill the plant from within. Watch for small entry holes with sawdust-like frass at the base of the stem. Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt), an organically approved option, is recommended for prevention, as larvae cannot be controlled once they are inside the stem.

Squash Bugs: These flat, gray-brown insects cluster on the undersides of leaves and at the base of plants, sucking plant fluids and causing wilting. They reduce yields and stunt pumpkin size. Sevin and

Thiodan are labeled control options. Synthetic pyrethroids are available as alternatives but Extension sources note that they may prove to be less effective for controlling pumpkin pests.

Powdery Mildew: Powdery mildew is a foliar disease that appears as a white, powdery coating on pumpkin leaves. It is one of the major diseases affecting Texas pumpkin crops. Fungicide applications are available to help protect crop foliage.

Other Pests and Diseases: Pumpkins are also susceptible to cucumber beetles, pickleworm, anthracnose, angular leaf spot, blight, gummy stem blight, bacterial wilt, black rot, and damping off.

Non-chemical methods should be used to the fullest extent possible, including rotating pumpkins with other crops and tilling crop residue into the soil after harvest to reduce disease pressure.



Squash vine borer



Squash bug



Powdery mildew

Watering: Water plants enough to keep them from wilting. If the weather is very dry, water at least once a week. Sandy soils will need to be watered more often than heavy clay soils.

Weeds: Keep surrounding growing area free from weeds. Weeds reduce yields and cut quality by reducing fruit size. They compete for sunlight, water, and nutrients and also host pathogens, viruses, and insects.

Harvest

Harvest pumpkins when the fruits are full size, the rind is firm and glossy, and the bottom portion touching the soil is cream to orange colored. Pumpkins are best when cut, not pulled from the vine. Store harvested pumpkins in a cool, dry area.

The Bottom Line

Growing pumpkins in Texas is not for the faint of heart, and anyone who tells you otherwise has not tried to keep a vine alive through a Washington County August. The heat, the pests, and the timing will test your patience more than once. But the work is worth it. There is something deeply satisfying about setting a pumpkin on your porch in the fall that you planted yourself in the middle of a Texas summer, knowing exactly what it took to get it there.



Sources and more information:

- *"Easy Gardening: Squash," Joseph Masabni and Patrick Lillard.*
- *"Easy Gardening: Harvesting, Handling, and Storing Vegetables," Joseph Masabni.*
- *"Fall Vegetable Gardening Guide for Texas," Larry Stein and Joe Masabni.*
- *"Powdery Mildew," Vegetable Resources, Texas A&M AgriLife.*
- *"Pumpkins in Texas: Crop Brief on Production, Pests and Pesticides," Dr. Dudley Smith and Dr. Juan Anciso.*
- *"Squash Bug," Field Guide to Common Texas Insects, Texas A&M AgriLife.*
- *"Squash Vine Borer," Vegetable IPM, Texas A&M AgriLife.*
- *"Texas Home Vegetable Gardening Guide," Joseph Masabni.*
- *"Vegetable Garden Planting Guide," Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.*