

Bell County Master Gardeners  
Tip of the Week  
By Candy Mullen  
“Pumpkin Time “

Jack O’Lanterns, as we know them in October, begin as lowly pumpkins, America’s native fruit. In Europe, before pumpkins, people actually used turnips, potatoes, or beets carved into scary faces to keep Stingy Jack or other evil spirits away. When immigrants came to America, they discovered that pumpkins made a perfect jack o’lantern! Today pumpkins are a \$141 million dollar business producing 1.1 billion pounds in 2008.

Pumpkins are easy to grow if you follow the guidelines. Only plant them after all danger of frost is past as they are a warm season vegetable. The soil must be thoroughly warmed. This means about late May in the north to early July in extremely southern states. If pumpkins are planted too early, they may soften and rot before Halloween. You need about 50 to 100 square feet per hill with about 5 seeds per hill for the vining pumpkins. Plant them about one inch deep and allow 5 to 6 feet between hills. When they are well-established, thin plants to about 2 plants per hill. They now have miniature and bush varieties with different space needs. Keep patch weed free and irrigate if an extended dry period occurs early.

There are pumpkin growing contests with people competing for growing the largest. The record stands at 1,140 pounds, and the largest pie was five feet in diameter and weighed over 350 pounds!

Pumpkins, squash, and gourds are members of the vine crops called “cucurbits” derived from *Curcubita* often shortened to *C*. They can cross-pollinate within species, but it doesn’t affect the taste, shape or color of the current season’s fruit.

Right now, Texas gardeners are reaping the bounty of that earlier planting. We all have wonderful memories of selecting that perfect pumpkin, taking it home to carve the “best” face, and lighting that candle stub for the spooky effect. There are pumpkin patches around Central Texas for children to make those same memories today. Of course, those pumpkin pies are another memory to savor! Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact [ask.bcmqa@gmail.com](mailto:ask.bcmqa@gmail.com)

