



Campaign for School Gardening



Crop Sheet: Pumpkins & Squashes

Description

Latin name: Cucurbita maxima/ C. moschata/ C. pepo

Cucurbita = Latin name for gourd, maxima = largest, moschata = musky, pepo = 'false berry'.

These crops are in the cucumber family. Their relatives include cucumbers, courgettes, melons and gourds.

With sprawling stems or bushy plant forms, pumpkins and squashes have large, prickly leaves & stems. They have bright yellow flowers, which develop into the part that we eat; this is the fruit of the plant. Each 'fruit' can contain lots of seeds.



There are lots of amazing shapes, sizes and colours, such as the shell-shaped patty pan squashes; giant pumpkins weighing more than 400kg, curvy butternuts, the bluey-grey 'Crown Prince' pumpkin and green and white striped 'Sweet Dumpling' squash.

History

The oldest archaeological remains of Cucurbita pepo date to 7000-5,550 BC and were found in Mexico. These crops are thought to have evolved in Central and South America from gourd-like fruits, originally with bitter flesh but edible seeds. Other cultivars with much tastier flesh developed over time.

By the time Columbus arrived in America (1492), pumpkins were being cultivated by native Americans alongside sweetcorn (maize) and beans all the way along the east coast. It is believed that they were introduced to Europe after this date.

When the Pilgrim Fathers, from England and Holland, first landed at Cape Cod, Massachusetts in 1620, they had little experience of growing their own crops. In the first winter half of their party died, but their fortune in future years is said to have been thanks to the Patuxet Squanto Indians showing them how to grow pumpkins. In October 1621 they held their first thanksgiving meal which included boiled pumpkin to eat, and the pumpkin has been part of traditional thanksgiving celebrations ever since.

Interesting Facts About Pumpkins & Squashes

They can be cooked in many ways – sautéed, stuffed, boiled, baked or pickled, and used in a number of dishes including risotto and soup. Pumpkin pie is a traditional sweet dish cooked in the USA as part of Thanksgiving Day celebrations.



Seeds can be eaten raw or made into pumpkin seed oil used for salad dressings and cooking.

Carved pumpkin lanterns originate from the old English tradition of carving the faces of lost souls into hollowed out turnips. A candle was placed inside, and the lanterns put on doorsteps to ward off evil spirits on the night of Halloween (31st October).

(Sources: 'RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening' by Michael Pollock; 'Food Plants of the World' by Ben-Erik van Wyk, 'The New Oxford Book of Food Plants' by J.C. Vaughan & C.A. Geissler and 'Cabbages and Kings: the origins of fruit and vegetables by Jonathon Roberts). (Photographs: Taken by & copyright RHS/ Open Future growit project. Thanks to Petersgate Infants, St John the Baptist and Barnham Primary Schools).



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How to Grow Pumpkins & Squashes

Growing conditions

Pumpkins and squashes are closely related and are grown in basically the same way. They need a sunny position, a moisture-retentive soil and somewhere out of cold winds. Add lots of organic matter, such as compost or well-rotted manure, to improve soil structure.

When to grow

Pumpkins and squashes can be started off in pots in greenhouses or on school windowsill in April (after the Easter break). These can then be planted out in the garden May, just before the half-term break (protect with bottle cloches or fleece if risk of frost).

If you don't have the space inside (or if your indoor crop fails), seeds can be sown direct outside in late May-early June.

How to grow

Indoors (April-May): Sow one seed on its side at a depth of 2cm in a small 8cm pot. Place in a greenhouse or on a sunny windowsill. Keep well watered. Once plants are about 6-8cm high, plant outside allowing 60cm-1.2m between plants depending on the type you are growing, check the seed packet. You can make cylindrical cloches out of large plastic drinks bottles with the tops and bottoms cut off and gently slid over the young plants (take off before they get too large though), alternatively you can protect with fleece until the plants are established.



Outside (May- June): Sow two seeds on their side, 2.5cm deep approximately 5cm apart, protect with cloches or fleece until established. Thin seedlings to leave the strongest one.



For biggest fruits give lots of water. In dry spells as their leaves grow large it can be difficult to get the water on the soil and to the roots, so sink a pot or use the cut top off your bottles as a funnel and water into this to get the water to the roots.

Feed every couple of weeks with a liquid fertiliser, such as seaweed feed, once the first fruits start to swell. Keep the fruits off the soil with black plastic, bits of wood or tiles.

Harvesting

Harvest summer squashes as needed, when the fruit is quite small. For pumpkins, winter squashes and marrows let the fruit mature on the plant and remove before the first frost (i.e. just before the autumn half term). They can be harvested when they are fully coloured and have a hollow ring sound when tapped. These can be used straight away or will store in a cool, frost-free shed for a few months to use over winter.

Pest and Disease Problems

Slugs and snails may attack small seedlings. Powdery mildew is the main disease to affect these crops in late summer – cut off the affected leaves and do not put on the compost heap. (Refer to RHS website gardening advice for examples of pests and diseases).

Varieties to try: Baby pumpkins: 'Baby Bear', 'Mars'; Giant: 'Mammoth'; Squashes: 'Butternut', 'Crown Prince', 'Sweet Dumpling'.

(Sources: RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening by Michael Pollock & RHS Website 'Grow Your Own Veg': www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/index.asp)