

Oh, My Gourd!  
The Great Pumpkin Phenomenon  
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Nothing welcomes fall like a bright orange pumpkin on your front steps, a trip to the pumpkin patch to pick out just the right one to carve for Halloween, or imbibing in a Pumpkin Spice Latte and a piece of pumpkin pie. These are all part of tradition, yet, what do we know about pumpkins?

First, let us get a basic slice of pumpkin history. Over 7,500 years old, pumpkins are one of the oldest domesticated plants, and originate from Central America/Mexico. Considered a native plant in North America, pumpkins (*Cucurbita pepo*) are a winter squash. Pumpkins are gourds, as are honeydew melons, watermelons, and cantaloupes.

This versatile, nutritious, easy to grow and preserve food source is a fruit. It is 92 percent water and an excellent source of potassium, vitamin A, and beta-carotene. Every part of the pumpkin is edible, the skin, leaves, flowers, pulp, stem, and seeds!

The pumpkin originally got its name from the Greek term, pepon, which means melon. The French changed the pronunciation to pompon. Lost in translation, the name was changed by the British to pumpkin. The colonists of New England changed the final pronunciation to what we know today.

English colonists were already acquainted with pumpkins before arriving in the New World. It is likely that during a three-day meeting between colonists and the Native American Wampanoag tribe, pumpkin was served at what became known as The First Thanksgiving. Served not as a sweet desert, but as a savory dish. Pumpkin was a mainstay in Colonial New England as stated in this 1630's poem:

“For pottage and puddings and custards and pies, Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies: We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon, If it were not for pumpkins, we would be undone.”

Native Americans used the unique Three-Sisters method of food cultivation. On a riverbank, they planted pumpkins/squash next to maize and beans. The three crops sustained each other. The corn stalks served as support for the beans to climb. The beans grew in the sunlight,

nourished the soil, and reinforced the corn stalks. The growing pumpkins sheltered the corn's shallow roots and their vining leaves discouraged weeds.

Culinary history states that pumpkin pie and Thanksgiving did not become an item until the 1800s. The editor of a woman's magazine, Sarah J. Hale, campaigned to make Thanksgiving a national holiday on the last Thursday of November. She supplied recipes for the occasion, including pumpkin pie. It took an act of Congress in 1941 to finally make Thanksgiving Day a legal, national United States holiday.

Irish immigrants brought the tradition of carving pumpkins to America. In their homeland they carved Jack-O'-Lanterns out of turnips or potatoes. The pumpkins in America were much easier to carve. The idea was to keep away evil spirits. An Irish legend told the story of Stingy Jack, an unpleasant fellow, who played tricks on unsuspecting people.

Now you have some pumpkin history to ponder as you carve your Halloween pumpkin, trick-or-treat, or indulge in that extra slice of Thanksgiving pumpkin pie!

Master Gardener classes are offered monthly throughout the county. You can find our class schedule at: [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public\\_Education\\_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698), and recorded classes on many gardening topics here: [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public\\_Education/Classes/](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education/Classes/).

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open weekly on Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. -noon, March through November. We do close due to rain, please check our website for details [https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/Demonstration\\_Garden/](https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Demonstration_Garden/)

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: [mgeldorado.ucanr.edu](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu). or leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news).