

PUMPKIN

About Pumpkin History

Pumpkins are believed to be native to North America. Seeds from related plants found in Mexico date back to 7000 to 5500 BC. The name “pumpkin” originated from the Greek word “pepon,” which means “large melon.”

When the pilgrims arrived, they found Native Americans using pumpkins in a variety of ways. They would roast and eat them, but they would also use them in other ways, such as weaving the dried strips into mats. Pumpkins were one of the first foods the Indians taught the settlers to cultivate. The settlers used them in soups, stews, and desserts.

The Plant

The bright orange color of the pumpkin is an easy indicator that it is high in beta carotene, an important antioxidant. Beta carotene converts into vitamin A in the body. It may help prevent cancer and heart disease. Research also indicates that beta carotene may offer some protection against degenerative diseases that occur with aging. Virtually all parts of the pumpkin are edible, including leaves, stems, flowers, seeds, fruit, and skin. Pumpkin has no fat or cholesterol. It provides vitamins A and C, calcium, iron, folate, and potassium. A half-cup of raw pumpkin has only 15 calories.

How to Buy

Choosing a pumpkin may depend upon its intended use. For making a jack-o'-lantern, you may want a pumpkin that is quite large. But for cooking, you'll want a smaller or “sweet” pumpkin. Larger pumpkins can be cooked, but the smaller ones give the best flavor. Avoid pumpkins that have less than 2 inches of stem because this can lead to early decay. Look for clean pumpkins having few blemishes or soft spots. The shape of the pumpkin does not matter.

How to Prepare

More about making pumpkin puree can be found at the University of Illinois Extension web page (<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/pumpkins/selection.cfm>).

Seeds can be toasted or dried. Stems and leaves can be boiled or sauteed. Flowers can be treated just as other squash blossoms by being stuffed or fried. The fruit can be baked, boiled, steamed, or fried. The skin is edible, but it is usually too tough unless it is a very young pumpkin. A common method of preparing pumpkin is to make a puree. You can do this by cleaning the pumpkin (removing seeds and fibers), cutting it up into large chunks or strips, and then boiling, steaming, baking, or microwaving it. Once it has been cooked, remove the skin and use a food processor or masher to produce a pumpkin puree.

How to Store

Mature pumpkins can be stored for several months. Choose a dry, airy location having a temperature of 50 to 55 degrees F with mild humidity. Handle pumpkins carefully to avoid blemishes or bruises, which can lead to decay. And be sure to remove any pumpkins that show signs of spoilage immediately from the area. Pumpkin puree can be frozen and stored for later use.

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