

# THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Autumn, especially October, is synonymous with pumpkins. Pumpkins are part of the Cucurbitaceae family which includes other familiar plants such as squash, cucumbers, melons, and gourds. You may have heard them referred to as cucurbits. If allowed to go to maturity, cucurbits typically produce a round, orange fruit- and yes, pumpkins are horticulturally classified as fruit, not a vegetable.

## PUMPKINS IN ILLINOIS

Illinois, especially Morton, Illinois, is known as the pumpkin capital of the world because approximately 85% of the world's canned pumpkins are grown and processed in the community. In total, between 90 - 95% of the global production of processing pumpkins are grown in Illinois.

## SO MUCH VARIETY

Breeding programs have produced several varieties of pumpkins best suited for a variety of purposes. Scientifically, nearly all pumpkins and gourds are in three species: *Cucurbita maxima*, *Cucurbita moschata*, and *Cucurbita pepo*. Common terms for pumpkin varieties include Jack-o'-lantern, mini, white, giant, and pie. In addition to the traditionally classified pumpkin, squash and gourds are related and provide additional opportunities for variety.

Depending on the intended use, dozens of pumpkin cultivars are available in all shapes, sizes, a multitude of colors, some with warts, some without, others with variegation, others uniformly colored. The possibilities are endless.



## PICKING PUMPKINS

When choosing the perfect pumpkin, begin by choosing a fruit that has a stem. Pumpkins without at least one inch of stem will rot faster than those with a stem intact. Next, examine pumpkins for soft spots, mold, wrinkles, holes, or open cuts. If you find any of these, move to the next pumpkin because these areas will rot more quickly than blemish-free pumpkins.

Many people look for a nice round pumpkin, but the shape of the pumpkin isn't all that important when it comes to durability. A flat bottom helps keep the pumpkin upright if wanting to carve it but that is for aesthetics not longevity.



Once the perfect pumpkin has been obtained, clean the pumpkin with a mild bleach solution (20%) to remove soil and bacteria that can promote rot. Carved pumpkin cuts can be coated with petroleum jelly to help prevent moisture loss and exclude organisms that cause decay. Finally, keeping pumpkins cool and dry will help extend the shelf life.

## AFTER THE HOLIDAYS

Be it the passage of holidays or the process of decomposition that signals the need to dispose of the festive gourds and natural décor, what follows are a few tips for disposing of natural waste in a responsible way.

### COMPOST

Without having permission from a private landowner, dumping pumpkins in a field, ditch, or nature preserve is considered littering and is against the law. Although the waste is natural and will decompose, without proper management, the process will take too long and can create adverse ecological impacts.

Throwing pumpkins and other natural products into the garbage is not recommended. Organic matter in a waste facility throwing them away in the garbage adds organic matter to landfills where the material is buried and rots in an anaerobic environment creating the potent greenhouse gas methane.



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The recommended way to compost a pumpkin is to incorporate it into an existing compost pile. Breaking the pumpkin into pieces will help speed the process of decomposition. Be sure to turn the compost pile to introduce air into the interior of the pile which promotes decomposition. It is possible to incorporate pumpkins into compost tumblers but the moisture content of pumpkins is high so the system should be monitored and amended if conditions become too wet for aerobic microbial decomposition.

Some compost facilities or municipalities offer services for pumpkin disposal. Check with local ordinances for options and more information. In Illinois, pumpkin smash events are hosted by various organizations. If hosting or looking for one of these events, visit the [SCARCE](#) website for more information.

If you have livestock, personally or know a farmer, pumpkins can be fed to animals in moderation. Pumpkins are not a regular part of most barnyard animal's diet, so moderation is imperative to avoid upset stomachs...think of it as a seasonal treat. Only pumpkins that are free from rot and mold and free of unnatural materials (wax, paint, glitter, ribbon, etc.) should be fed to animals.

## CONSUME

Cultivation programs have produced a wide variety of pumpkins that offer characteristics better suited to specific use. Some types are better suited for baking and eating but all are edible.

Pumpkin pulp can be cooked and incorporated into a variety of menu items including soup, bread, desserts, and more. Illinois Extension's [Live Well, Eat Well](#) blog offers nine unique ways of cooking with pumpkin.

Pumpkin seeds are a great source of minerals, protein, and monounsaturated fat. To roast, scoop the seeds out the pumpkin, wash to remove the stringy, fibrous materials, boil in salted water for 10 minutes, coat seeds with oil or melted butter and spread evenly on a baking pan. Roast seeds for 30 to 40 minutes, stirring every ten minutes until crisp and golden brown. Store seeds in an air-tight container and refrigerate until eaten.



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## OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider

- Carve or paint a pumpkin.
- Try a 'new to you' pumpkin recipe.
- Make a plan for pumpkin disposal after the holiday.

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Emily Swihart, Horticulture Educator  
Tracy Jo Mulliken, Program Coordinator

321 West 2nd Avenue, Milan, IL 61264  
(309) 756-9978  
Email: [ESwihart@illinois.edu](mailto:ESwihart@illinois.edu)