



It's the Great Pumpkin...or is that a gourd?

By Keith Mickler
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Not just for pies, the pumpkin is one of the most versatile members of the cucurbit family. The pumpkin is not only used for pies and soups, but also has seeds that make tasty snacks when roasted.

First, let's glance into the pumpkin family history. Both pumpkins and gourds are members of the cucurbit family — *Cucurbitaceae*. There are other vegetables in this family such as watermelons, squash, cucumbers and cantaloupes. The cultivation of both plants predates colonial America.

In fact, gourds were probably one of the first plants domesticated by man and were used for utensils as early as 2400 B.C. Pumpkins were used by Native Americans long before Columbus visited our shores and pumpkins readily found their way to the first Thanksgiving table.

Early settlers used Pumpkins much as we use them today — for food and decoration. Although members of the same family, cultivated species of pumpkins and gourds vary widely. There is some overlap, though. The term pumpkin has been the subject of many heated scholarly debates. The scientific name of most pumpkins is *Cucurbita pepo*. Some gourds have the same scientific name. Mature and immature fruit of the pumpkin are generally edible. However, a large portion of the commercially produced pumpkins and gourds are used for decorative purposes.

The pumpkin really comes into its own as a symbol of Halloween, when the plump orange fruit is transformed into a jack-o-lantern and decorates the front porch and lawns of many homes.

Cucurbita pepo is where most of the traditional and naked seed type pumpkins are classified. Naked seed types include Eat All, Lady Godiva and Trick or Treat. Traditional varieties in this classification include most of the small to large pumpkins but exclude the giant pumpkins.

Some traditional varieties are: Connecticut Field, Howden's Field, Spirit, Small Sugar, Funny Face and Jackpot. The classification. *Cucurbita maxima* is characterized by its large fruit and includes the mammoth and giant varieties including Big Max, Mammoth Prize and Atlantic Giant. *Cucurbita moschata* varieties such as Dickinson Field, Golden Cushaw and Kentucky Field are the buff colored pumpkins that are excellent for making pies and processing.

The gourd has a storied history of use in both practical as well as decorative purposes. Until the arrival of indoor plumbing, most drinking wells in the United States were equipped with a long-handled dipper gourd. Gourds were used in ancient times as containers in which to bury food, as facial masks, as protection from the sun, and as bowls, pipes and musical instruments.

Present-day use of the gourd has expanded to birdhouses, and one type is used to produce a very popular natural sponge. Immature fruit of some types are edible, but the predominant use continues to be for decorative purposes (miniature pumpkins) or other uses mentioned above.

Plants that produce yellow flowers are the *Cucurbita* sp. gourds, which are mostly thick shelled and difficult to cure. *Cucurbita pepo* var. *ovifers* fruits are generally small and have a variety of shapes and colors and are not edible. Most of the common ornamental gourds are in this group and include: Egg, White Pear, Apple, Broad Striped, Striped Pear, Ladle or Scoop, Mock Orange, Bicolor Pear, Bell, Spoon, Big Bell, and Miniature.

Pumpkins

Cucurbita maxima fruits are medium to medium large. The smaller types in this group have hard and durable shells. Varieties in this group include Turks Turban and Aladdin.

Confused? In all actuality, it is very difficult to tell a pumpkin from a gourd. It doesn't really matter whether it's a pumpkin or a gourd; just have fun with gardening and the Halloween tradition.

If you want to grow the biggest pumpkin in your neighborhood, you will need to select one of the *Cucurbita maxima* species such as Big Max or Atlantic Giant. Atlantic Giant currently holds the world record at more than 800 pounds.

Oh, and one more thing: Good luck hunting for "The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown."

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