

THE LIFE OF A PUMPKIN - update #1

What kinds of vegetables do you like to eat? Do you have a favorite? Have you ever tried to grow a vegetable plant of your very own? It's fun, and winter is a great time of year to start making garden plans to do just that!

We're starting a new STEAM project to track the life of a pumpkin throughout the coming growing season. Look for lots more information in the days ahead as we show you how to do it. You can follow our instructions and grow your own pumpkin right along with us, or you can just enjoy watching our efforts while we do all of the hard work. 😊 We'll provide photo updates of our little project, *The Life of a Pumpkin*, in which we will document activities from the planning stages to fall harvest and everything in between. Please join us on this exciting and educational STEAM adventure!

What is a pumpkin?

Pumpkins are a type of squash, a tasty vegetable you're probably familiar with. Squash are part of the **genus** (a large group of different but closely related, scientifically defined, plants and animals) *Cucurbita*, which also includes gourds. There are two types of squash, depending on the thickness of their skin: **summer squash**, which is picked before fully mature and while the skin is still thin and tender, and **winter squash**, which has a thicker, tougher skin and can survive cooler temperatures. Zucchini, crookneck, and pattypan are some of the many varieties of summer squash. Pumpkin, acorn, and butternut are varieties of winter squash.



Thin-skinned summer squash



Thick-skinned winter squash

We usually think of pumpkins as being orange and round, with smooth, slightly ribbed skin that's perfect for carving jack-o'-lanterns at Halloween. But did you know that some pumpkins are flat, others are bumpy, a few have stripes, and some are pure white?



Cinderella (Rouge Vif d'Etampes)



Mini Tiger



Baby Boo



A pumpkin's thick shell protects the seeds and pulp inside. Pumpkin seeds, also called **pepitas**, are tasty to eat when toasted. The pulp is the fleshy part of the pumpkin that's used to make pies and other delicious treats. The seeds and the pulp are also full of vitamins and minerals that keep our bodies healthy.

All about seeds

In order to grow a pumpkin, you will need to plant pumpkin seeds. Many local plant nurseries and hardware stores sell seeds, or you can buy them online. Some companies feature **organic** seeds, collected from plants raised under strict rules that don't allow certain chemicals to be used. Others specialize in **heirloom** seeds, carefully grown and saved and often passed down from farmer to farmer. Still other companies offer newer **hybrids**, created when breeders cross-pollinate different plants to maximize their best features, such as size or resistance to disease. Many seed companies offer a combination of all of the above.

There are LOTS of seed suppliers -- large seed companies and small seed companies. Some smaller ones are run by families and specialize in local and regional varieties of special interest. You may want to compare prices, looking at the number of seeds contained in various package options as well as the cost of having the seeds mailed to you before deciding on which seed company to buy from.

Now that you know a little bit more about pumpkins, and a lot more about seeds, it's time to consider which variety you want to grow. Right now we might be dreaming about the pumpkins we hope to harvest in the fall, but we've got to plant seeds in order to produce those pumpkins! Here is what we need to do next to get started on *The Life of a Pumpkin*.

ACTIVITY: Research different pumpkin varieties

Materials

- Seed catalogs
 - Markers or crayons
1. Order print catalogs from a few seed companies* or view their digital versions online with a grown-up.
 2. Find the pumpkin section of the catalog. Pumpkins might also be listed under the heading Squash, or Winter Squash, for reasons we discussed earlier.
 3. Look at the pictures and read the descriptions of the different pumpkin varieties.
 4. Mark the varieties you think are most interesting (a size, color, shape, etc. that you like) with your marker or crayon.
 5. Mark or highlight the part of the description, usually right after the name of the variety, that lists the number of days to harvest or bloom. For example, we like *Casper* the white pumpkin in this catalog, and the description says, "90 days". That means it will take 90 days from the time we plant, or **sow**, the seed until the pumpkin it produces is ready to pick. A shorter number of days to harvest means your plant will have a better chance of producing a pumpkin before an early freeze can damage it.





Steps 2 and 3: So many kinds of pumpkins!



Steps 4 and 5: Narrowing our choices

These first steps to select a pumpkin variety can take awhile as you look at all the many different pumpkins available, then try to decide which varieties interest you the most.

*We've listed a few seed companies here that offer a good selection of vegetables and plenty of pumpkins. Many also have flower and herb seeds, too. Printed copies of the catalogs are nice to have. They're fun to look through and are also a handy resource, with plenty of useful gardening information.

- Fedco Seeds <https://www.fedcoseeds.com/>
- Johnny's Selected Seeds www.johnnyseeds.com/
- Nichols Garden Nursery www.nicholsgardennursery.com/
- Pinetree Garden Seeds www.superseeds.com/
- Renee's Garden Seeds <https://www.reneesgarden.com/>
- Seeds of Change <https://www.seedsofchange.com/seeds>
- Territorial Seed Company www.territorialseed.com
- W. Atlee Burpee Seeds www.burpee.com

Keep in mind that these are only a few of the many seed companies out there. Consider this list a starting point as you do your own research for your preferred pumpkin variety. Browse the websites and catalogs, dream of spring, then get ready to get started and watch your plant grow!

Next time: We'll need to determine which pumpkin variety will grow best in our part of the Truckee Meadows. Stay tuned for that important information!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Materials available from the Washoe County Library System:

[About Our World. Seeds and Plants \[DVD videorecording\]](#) by Wonderscape Entertainment



[*The Magic School Bus Plants Seeds: A Book About How Living Things Grow*](#) based on the series written by Joanna Cole

[*What Kinds Of Seeds Are These?*](#) by Heidi Bee Roemer

Videos:

Scholastic, A Pumpkin Grows https://youtu.be/AB-dfi_0TsQ

SciShow Kids, How Does A Seed Become A Plant? <https://youtu.be/tkFPyue5X3Q>

Websites:

HGTV, Easy Plants for Kids to Grow <https://www.hgtv.com/outdoors/flowers-and-plants/easy-plants-for-kids-to-grow-pictures>

Kids Gardening, Big Seeds for Little Hands <https://kidsgardening.org/big-seeds-for-little-hands/>

