



All About Pumpkins

A pumpkin is really a squash. It is a member of the Cucurbita family that includes squash and cucumbers. The name pumpkin originated from “pepon”-the Greek word for large melon.” Pumpkins are now grown all over the world on six of the seven continents, with Antarctica being the sole exception. They are even grown in Alaska. The self proclaimed “Pumpkin Capital of the World” is Morton, Illinois where Libby Company has it’s pumpkin industry and plant. The tradition of carving pumpkins started when the Irish immigrated to the United States when they found it was easier to carve a pumpkin instead of a turnip for celebrating their ancient holiday.

History of Pumpkins

Pumpkins are believed to have originated in Central America. Seeds from related plants have been found in Mexico, dating back over 7000 years to 5500 B.C. Native Americans used pumpkins as a staple in their diets for centuries. They called the pumpkin “isqoutm Squash.” Native Americans used pumpkin seeds for food and medicine. They also flattened strips of pumpkin, dried them and made mats. Early settlers ate pumpkin as a staple in their diet. Colonist filled a hollowed out shell with milk, honey, and spices, then baked it in hot ashes. This is considered the origin of the pumpkin pie.

Selection

The most popular use of pumpkin is for decoration as jack-o-lanterns. Jack-o-lantern pumpkins (“field pumpkins”) are too stringy to eat. When selecting a pumpkin for cooking, the best selection is a “pie pumpkin” or “sweet sugar pumpkin.” They are smaller, sweeter and less watery than the large jack-o-lantern pumpkin.

Proper Storage

Storing pumpkins requires the proper combination of temperature and humidity. Pumpkins prefer cool and dry conditions. The optimal storage conditions are 50°-55°F temperature and relative humidity of 50-70 percent. Depending on the pumpkin variety they can last up to 2 months when stored properly. You may also consider cooking your pumpkin and freezing (0°F) until you make your wonderful recipes during the holidays. To freeze, measure 1 to 2 cups of cooled pumpkin, place in a freezer container, leave a 1-inch headspace or pack in a freezer bag and label and date. USDA recommends you use the frozen pumpkin within 9 months to 1 year. USDA does not recommend canning pumpkin puree because it cannot be safely canned due to the viscosity (thickness) of the puree.

Cooking Methods

Preparation: Remove the stem with a sharp knife. Cut pumpkin in half then scrape out stringy mass and seeds. Separate seeds from mass and save seeds for baking or gardening next year. Rinse pumpkin in cold water. Select one of the following methods for cooking.

Baking Method: Cut pumpkin in half or into quarter size pieces. Place cut side down on a large cookie sheet. Bake at 350°F for approximately one hour or until fork tender.

Steaming/Boil Method: Cut pumpkin in 4 inch pieces. Place pieces in a large pot with 2 cups of water. Cover the pot and boil for 20 to 30 minutes or until tender. Or use a steamer or pressure canner, which will take less time (10 to 12 minutes).

Microwave Method: Cut pumpkin in half or quarter size pieces, place cut side down on a microwave safe plate or tray. Microwave on high for 10 to 15 minutes. Check for doneness. Continue to cook, and check in 1-2 minute intervals until tender.

Pumpkin Puree

Cool pumpkin to warm temperature to safely handle then remove cooked pumpkin meat from the shell and puree with a blender, food processor, ricer, or use a potato masher. Add ½ teaspoon lemon juice to prevent puree from getting dark in color.

Seeds

To make salted pumpkin seeds follow this simple recipe: Spread 2 cups of cleaned pumpkin seeds on a cookie sheet. Pour 1 Tablespoon of melted butter or oil over seeds and sprinkle with salt to personal taste. Bake in oven at 200°F until seeds are golden brown. Stir occasionally to toast evenly. Pumpkin seeds for gardening can be stored for up to five years without much special treatment. Wash and dry seeds and store in a sealed container at a constant temperature between 35 and 41°F and eliminate excess moisture.

Nutritional Value

(1 cup cooked pumpkin without salt)

Calories 49	Zinc 1mg
Protein 2 grams	Selenium .50mg
Carbohydrates 12 grams	Vitamin C 12 mg
Dietary Fiber 3 grams	Niacin 1mg
Calcium 37 mg	Folate 21mcg
Iron 1.4 mg	Vitamin A 2650 IU
Magnesium 22 mg	Vitamin E 3mg
Potassium 564 mg	

Recipes for the Holidays

There are so many great recipes using pumpkin. My friend, Raquel who is a great cook and she gave me several great recipes some of which include vegetarian-stuffed pumpkin, pumpkin flan, Mexican spiced pumpkin ice, and squash soup. I also searched the internet and found several other recipes I would like to personally try. If you would like to download other pumpkin recipes click on the pumpkin icon from our home.

Here are two quick and simple recipes Raquel highly recommends for the holidays.

Pumpkin Cookies

In a bowl blend 1 cup butter or shortening until creamy. Gradually add 1 cup until the mixture is smooth. Add 1 cup pumpkin puree, 1 egg, 1 tsp. vanilla and beat the batter well. Sift together 2 cups flour, 1 tsp. of each baking powder, baking soda, and cinnamon, and ½ tsp. salt. Blend into the cream mixture. Stir in ½ cup each of chopped walnuts, chopped dates or raisins until well blended. Drop the batter from teaspoon onto a greased cookie sheet and bake at 375°F for 10-12 minutes.

Pumpkin Bread

¾ cup sugar

½ cup oil (monounsaturated or polyunsaturated and not hydrogenated)

2 eggs beaten

1 cup pumpkin puree

1/3 cup liquid (water, half and half, or orange juice)

1 ¼ cup white flour

¾ cup wheat flour

1 tsp soda

¼ tsp baking powder

1 tsp salt

½ tsp nutmeg

½ tsp cinnamon

½ tsp cloves

½ cup raisins

½ nuts (optional)

In a large bowl, stir together sugar, oil pumpkin and eggs. In a medium bowl, stir together both flours, baking powder, baking soda, spices and salt. Fold this into the pumpkin mixture, stirring the two mixtures just to moisten the dry ingredients. Stir in raisins and nuts. Pour the batter into a greased 9-in loaf pan. Bake in pre-heated 350°F temperature in an oven for about 1 hour or until the center of the bread is done.

Where to Get More Information

United State Department of Agriculture www.usda.gov

National Center for Food Preservation <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/>

Go to an online search engine and enter “pumpkin recipes.”

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