

# Praise the Pumpkin!

A FAVORITE AMONG NATIVE AMERICANS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, THIS VERSATILE FRUIT QUICKLY BECAME A LIFESAVER FOR COLONISTS IN THE NEW WORLD.

By Gregory LeFever



When European explorers first tramped through the New World's wilderness, they found pumpkins growing from the Caribbean to Canada. Good thing, too – in another hundred years, this plump fruit would become a mainstay in the diet of colonists in their new homeland, helping many to fend off winter-time starvation.

On his first voyage across the Atlantic in 1492, Christopher Columbus and his men visited native villages along the coastlines of present-day Cuba and the Bahamas. Pumpkins were unknown in Europe, and Columbus was so impressed with how vital this fruit was to the Indians that he took sample pumpkins back to Spain to show his journey's sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, introducing the pumpkin to the Old World.

A few years later, the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca in 1528 was in awe of the profusion of pumpkins growing around what today is Tampa, Florida. In 1539, another Spanish expedition leader, Hernando de Soto, wrote that the pumpkins he saw in Florida “are better and more flavorful than those of Spain” and the pumpkins he found in present-day Missouri “when roasted, have nearly the taste of chestnuts.”

Also in the 1530s but about 1,500 miles to the north, the French explorer Jacques Cartier found pumpkins being cultivated in the Native American village of Hochelega in present-day Montreal. He referred to them as gros melons, setting the stage for the eventual naming of this versatile member of the gourd family.



*The first European explorers in the New World found Native Americans growing an abundance of pumpkins and squash, including many varieties that have long since disappeared. Because some explorers used the French “pompon” or English “pumpeon” for both squash and pumpkin, it’s now difficult to know what they were describing. The varieties shown here are from the 18th century historical gardens at Colonial Williamsburg.*

Like the Spanish and French before them, early English explorers also found an abundance of pumpkins. In 1585, a scientist named Thomas Hariot was part of the ill-fated expedition to what today is Roanoke Island, where he must have encountered a variety of pumpkins and squash, writing, “Several forms are of one taste, and very good.” And the famous Captain John Smith of the Jamestown settlement on mainland Virginia wrote in 1612 about the planting habits of the nearby Powhatan tribe, “In May also amongst their corn, they plant Pumpeons.”

The problem with this history is that no one can be sure if all of those fruits the early explorers spotted were actually pumpkins, or how many of them may have been squash.

## A Maze of Varieties

Cucurbita pepo is the biological name of the family that includes pumpkins, various squash

*For pottage and puddings and custards and pies  
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies,  
We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon,  
If it were not for pumpkins we should be undone.”*

*~ Pilgrim verse from 1633*



*Cucurbita pepo is the biological name of the family that includes pumpkins, various squash – acorn, pattypan, yellow crookneck, zucchini and others – as well as gourds.*

– acorn, pattypan, yellow crookneck, zucchini and others – as well as gourds. The reason these plants are grouped into a single family is because they grow in the same places, under the same conditions, and have many characteristics in common.

In other words, a pumpkin is really just a large squash – which is part of the confusion surrounding the history of the pumpkin. The jumble of names hasn't helped, either.

Back in Europe, the Frenchman Cartier's gros melon term was translated back into the Latin for "large melon," which is pepone. Then the French apparently re-translated pepone to the more familiar pompon. The English transformed the French pompon to pumpeon – a word that appears in at least one of Shakespeare's play – and pumpeon became "pumpkin" within a hundred years of hitting American shores.

Whether you call them pumpkins or squash, the Cucurbita family goes back 10,000 years to Mexico, and containers of ancient pumpkin seeds dating back 6,000 years or more have been recovered at archaeological sites in South and Central America, Mexico and eastern United States.

Adding to the confusion is that pumpkins just a couple of centuries ago grew in various colors and shapes. In the 1700s, English horticulturalist John Gerard listed 18 different types of pumpkin – round, oval, oblong, and egg-shaped, in shades of orange, yellow, white, showing up in solid colors, stripes and marbled skins.

"Pumpkins of several kinds, oblong, round, flat or compressed, crook-necked, small, etc., are planted in all the English and French colonies," wrote a Swedish botanist, Peter Kalm, in his



journal in 1749 on a trip to what is now New York State. “They constitute a considerable part of the Indian food; however, the natives plant more squashes than common pumpkins.”

## Indian Ingenuity

Most of what we know about what Native Americans did with pumpkins comes from the observations of early European settlers, who were amazed at the ingenious uses the Indians found for this versatile fruit.



A favorite Indian method of eating pumpkin was to cut the fruit into strips for roasting over a fire. They also baked and boiled chunks of pumpkin. They devoured pumpkin seeds and were convinced of the seeds’ many medicinal qualities. Indians also dried strips of pumpkin to make a flavorful pumpkin jerky or eventually reconstituted them.

“The Indians, in order to preserve the pumpkins for a very long time, cut them in long slices that they fasten or twist together and dry either in the sun or by the fire in a room,” wrote Kalm in his journal. “When they are thus dried, they will keep for years, and when boiled they taste very well. The Indians prepare them thus at home and on their journeys.”

Different tribes had different recipes for pumpkins, including porridges, puddings and a type of pumpkin

tart. John Heckewelder, a Moravian minister who tended to the Delaware tribe in Pennsylvania in the 1760s, described a favorite cooking method:

“They are very particular in their choice of pumpkins and squashes and in their manner of cooking them. The women say that the less water is put to them, the better dish they make, and that it would be still better if they were stewed without any water, merely in the steam of the sap they contain. They cover up the pots in which they cook them with large leaves of the pumpkin vine, cabbages, or other leaves of the larger kind.”



*Roasted acorn squash.*

Fortunately for the first colonists, their Indian neighbors were eager to share pumpkins, their seeds and their pumpkin recipes.

## **Colonial Flavors and Uses**

Legend has it that the earliest European settlers in America did not fully appreciate the pumpkin until it helped keep them alive during those first winters in the New World when starvation was rampant. By the time Kalm, the Swedish botanist, visited the colonies a hundred years later, he reported that all of the colonists’ gardens were full of pumpkins.

Colonial cooks were quick to adapt Native American recipes to European methods of food preparation, as described in this 1674 account – one of the earliest recorded American recipes – from John Josslyn, an English visitor to the Massachusetts colony.

“Housewives slice them when ripe and cut them into dice, and so fill a pot with them of two or three Gallons, and stew them upon a gentle fire a whole day, and as they sink, then fill again with fresh Pompeons, not putting any liquor to them; and when it is stew’d enough, it will look like bak’d Apples; this they Dish, putting Butter to it, and a little Vinegar, (with some Spice, as Ginger, &c.) which makes it tart like an Apple, and so serve it up to be eaten with Fish or Flesh.”

A faster recipe popular in the colonies – undoubtedly originating with Native Americans – was to cut a pumpkin in half, remove the seeds, stick the halves back together and roast the pumpkin over a fire and then serve it with melted butter.

A mouth-watering variation of an Indian recipe was to cut off the top of the pumpkin and scoop out the seeds, then fill the hollow shell with a thick mixture of cream, honey, eggs, and spices such as nutmeg and cinnamon. Colonists replaced the top and set the pumpkin amidst the coals. When the shell had turned black, they lifted the pumpkin from the coals and scooped out the thick liquid along with the cooked pumpkin flesh inside. Mixing the pumpkin meat with the sweet liquid produced a delicious pumpkin custard.

Even in Puritan New England, alcohol in the form of hard apple cider or beer was regularly consumed. Colonists soon discovered that combining hops, maple sugar, persimmons and pumpkin could produce a reasonable beer, especially when barley was unavailable.

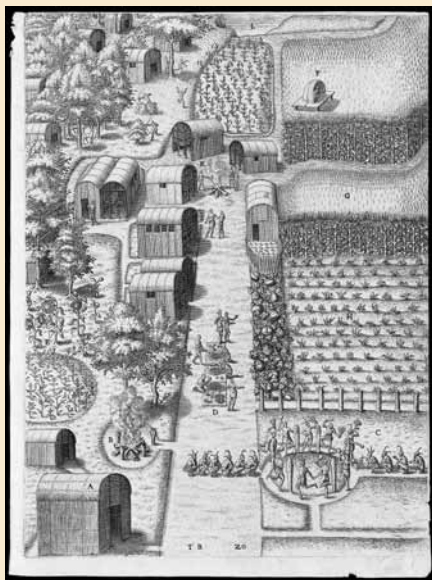
Of course the early settlers, like the Indians before them, dried their pumpkin shells for use as containers and added one more innovative use of their own. Some took half of a hollowed-out shell and placed it on a man or boy's head as a guide for cutting hair, earning some of the newly shorn males the nickname of "pumpkin head."

Sadly, our appreciation for pumpkin as a food has dimmed in the last century, as this proud fruit has become associated almost solely with traditional holiday pies, most of which today's cooks prepare from commercially canned pumpkin. The other use for this venerable plant is now a \$5 billion industry, growing them for Jack-o-Lanterns and similar yard decorations, where the emphasis is on size, shape and a strong stem at the genetically modified expense of taste and texture.

For that reason, you might consider growing pumpkins from heirloom seed from many American seed companies that still stock several varieties with the original rich flavor and buttery texture our Native American and colonial ancestors so greatly valued.

*This engraving called "The Village of Secoton" shows a very orderly Native American village in Virginia around 1590, nearly 20 years before English settlement of the region. Here, the Indians are growing fields of corn and tobacco and have a large pumpkin patch along the right side of the main path. The engraving is by the Belgian artist Theodor de Bry (1528-1598) as an illustration for "A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia" by English explorer Thomas Hariot (1560-1621).*

(Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



## Getting Pumpkins for Taste, Not Just Decoration

Modern-day Halloween has been pretty scary for pumpkins.

Not only are they carved up and often smashed as part of the festivities, but Halloween has robbed them of the very trait that made them so valuable for thousands of years – their tasty flesh. Many of today's pumpkins are tough, stringy and nearly inedible by comparison.

Over the past 50 years, the pumpkin has suffered two calamities.

First, it's fallen out of favor in American kitchens except for the traditional pumpkin pie, where the pumpkin often comes out of a can. And second, its popularity as a porch or yard decoration during Autumn has resulted in varieties that favor size and shape over flavor.

These two things have led to the near-disappearance of good-tasting pumpkins, such as the Winter Luxury Pie pumpkin and the Tennessee Sweet Potato pumpkin, both popular into the early 20th Century.

"The most popular pumpkins today are grown to be porch décor rather than pie filling," says James McWilliams, a history professor at Texas State University and author of *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America*. "They dominate the industry because of their durability, uniform size, orange color, wart-less texture and oval shape."

The solution for old-fashioned pumpkin flavor is to buy heirloom pumpkin seeds that are becoming more prevalent with organic and other smaller seed companies. You can also scout local farms and farmers' markets for older, tastier varieties. It's well worth the search or the effort of growing them – something you'll realize the moment you taste the rich flavor and smooth texture that made the pumpkin one of our ancestors' favorite foods.

## Tasty Roasted Pumpkin & Seeds

Pumpkin's great appeal both in early America and today are how easy it is to cook and how delicious it can taste. Roasted pumpkin was a favorite, and here are some tips on how to do it.

Get a variety such as Cinderella or Sugar Pie, small to medium size, for best taste. You can use a jack-o-lantern variety, but it may be stringier than a one bred for flavor.

Pre-heat your oven to 350 or 400 degrees. Cut the pumpkin in half and scoop out the seeds and stringy matter. Set the seeds aside.

- One way to cook it is to place the halves, flesh-side down, in a baking pan with a quarter-inch of water and roast until tender.
- You can also just set the halves flesh-side down on a greased baking sheet and roast until tender.
- Or you can slice the pumpkin into wedges and cook flesh-side up, the same way you'd roast vegetables, keeping an eye on when the pumpkin begins to brown along the edges.

Any of these methods will take from 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the oven temperature and the size of pumpkin pieces. Cook the pumpkin until tender and then remove from the oven.

Roasting causes the pumpkin to become sweeter to the taste. You can eat the meat straight from the shell, remove it, or even puree it. You can serve it with butter, adding salt and pepper or even a dash of cinnamon. Remember, pumpkin has been known for its versatility!

## And the Seeds

Both Native American and early colonial cultures valued pumpkin seeds for their medicinal value. Here's an easy method of toasting them so that you can choose whether to eat the seed's outer shell along with the seed itself, or just the inner seed.

- Rinse the seeds. Put them into a small saucepan. For every cup of seeds, add 4 cups of water and at least two tablespoons of salt.
- Bring to a boil and then simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and drain.
- Spread some olive oil on a baking pan and lay out the seeds in a single layer. Bake until the seeds begin to brown, usually about 15 minutes.

