

LET'S CELEBRATE PUMPKINS by Lynn Chimera



There's nothing that says fall like seeing pumpkins everywhere. Putting one on your front stoop makes an instant decoration and it carries you all the way through November.

Pumpkins originated in the Americas where their use goes back thousands of years. Seeds from related plants have been found in Mexico dating back to 7,000 to 5,500 BC! Native Americans used pumpkins as a staple in their diet, as well as medicinally, centuries before the Pilgrims landed.

The name "pumpkin" has a long history. Native Americans called it "isquotersquash". The first word for pumpkin given by early explorers was "pepon" which was Latin for large melon. The French changed it to "pompon" and the English to "pumpion". It was the American Colonists who changed "pumpion" to "pumpkin". It's been pumpkin ever since.

The tradition of carving scary faces in pumpkins goes back hundreds of

years. It began with an Irish myth about a man named "Stingy Jack". Originally, scary faces were carved into turnips and potatoes to frighten away Scary Jack and other evil spirits. Immigrants coming to the US found pumpkins were a much better medium for carving. Thus, the Jack-O-Lantern became part of our Halloween traditions.

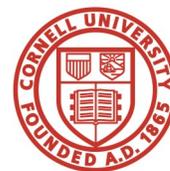
We usually think of using pumpkin for decoration or jack-o-lanterns, but it's a wonderful and nutritious food loaded with an important antioxidant, beta-carotene. It also contains potassium and Vitamin A along with numerous other vitamins, minerals and fiber. Pumpkin pulp is used for everything from soups to breads, and of course, pumpkin pie. Don't forget the seeds, they're easy to roast and make a nutritious snack.

Native Americans dried strips of pumpkin rind and wove them into mats as well as eating the pulp. Today pumpkins are also used as containers for pumpkin soup and floral arrangements.

For cooking pumpkins, the best selection is a "pie pumpkin" or "sweet pumpkin". They are smaller than the carving pumpkins and the flesh is sweeter and less watery. You can use the Jack-o-Lantern variety, but whatever you make will have a better flavor with pie pumpkins.

No matter what type of pumpkin you buy look for one with 2 or 3 inches of healthy stem. Stay away from ones with soft spots or blemishes. When using a fresh

pumpkin for puree, one pound of raw, untrimmed pumpkin is the equivalent of one cup of finished pumpkin puree. 



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