

# SMASHING PUMPKINS!

The best winter squashes to grow now so you can enjoy colourful, tasty fruits in autumn

Words Hazel Sillver

**G**rowing in all the colours of a bonfire, winter squashes are a joy in autumn, and they can be sown now. Part of the gourd family (Cucurbitaceae), which encompasses melons and cucumbers, they include some of the world's oldest cultivated plants. A pumpkin is a type of winter squash that usually has ribbed skin. Pumpkins are great fun to grow with children – the large seeds are easy for small fingers to sow, the characterful fruits often spark an interest in gardening and, of course, they're must-have plants for Halloween carving and autumn decor.

In general, pumpkin flesh is too watery for the kitchen, but many other winter squashes have nutritious, flavoursome flesh that can be used in a huge range of sweet and savoury dishes. The squashes that have red or orange skin are also excellent for brightening up the vegetable patch in late summer and early autumn; when trained up climbing frames, they provide splashes of fabulous fiery colour.



Sow

## How to sow and grow

Once they get going, winter squashes are easy, low-maintenance plants. The only fiddly bit is the start because they require warmth to germinate.

■ **TIMING** Sow pumpkins and squashes under cover one month before the frosts usually end in your area and plant out a month later. For example, sow in early May and plant out in early June.

■ **HARDINESS** In cold regions, opt for the hardier Kuri forms.

■ **POTS** Sow into individual 7-9cm pots. Place the large seed flat, gently press it into the compost, then cover lightly with compost.

■ **LOCATION** Warmth is required for germination, so it's often best to sit them on a warm windowsill indoors for one to two weeks before moving to an unheated greenhouse; cosset with fleece if the nights are cold.

■ **PLANT** In late May or early June, plant them outside in full sun and rich, retentive, well-drained earth. Plant 1m apart, 5cm deeper than they were in their pots.

■ **WATER** When newly planted, water regularly. Later, when fruits are developing, water in dry weather.

■ **PROBLEMS** Pick off slugs and snails. Powdery mildew can colour the leaves but rarely affects the fruit.

■ **HARVEST** Tap the squash and if it sounds hollow, it's ready. Harvest before the first frost.

■ **CURE, EAT AND STORE** Harden the fruit (to ripen, improve flavour and prepare for storage) by sitting on a sunny windowsill for one to two weeks. Eat fresh or store in dry warmth.



Water



Harvest



Plant



Snake gourd

## 5 squashes to grow with kids

Sow these weird and wonderful varieties now for an even scarier Halloween:

### 'Grey Ghost'

This pale-skinned pumpkin is perfect for carving into face lanterns to frighten the neighbours on October 31. Even better, its orange flesh tastes great.

### Snake gourd

*Trichosanthes cucumerina* is a long, thin fruit that curls and coils as it grows. After harvesting and drying, it's fun to paint them with snakeskin patterns.

### 'Big Max'

Have a family competition to see who can grow the biggest of this orange pumpkin cultivar. When fed with seaweed, it's capable of growing to 45kg.

### 'Marina di Chioggia'

Boasting very warty skin, this blue-green Italian pumpkin will give everyone a fright on Halloween. It also has good flavour for cooking.



'Marina di Chioggia'

PHOTOS: GAF PHOTOS, SHUTTERSTOCK



Squashes always look impressive when hanging from frames

### Use squash climbing frames

Building (or buying) a climbing structure for winter squashes not only saves space (because these sprawling plants can take up a huge amount of room on the ground), it also looks spectacular. Select your variety according to the size of your frame. For instance, miniature pumpkins need only a regular (sweet-pea sized) teepee; larger squashes will require a teepee (or an A-frame) made of sturdier, bigger branches. Because they hang down, squashes, pumpkins and gourds look stunning over pergolas or archways.



'Rouge Vif d'Etampes'

### 'Rouge Vif d'Etampes'

Known as the Cinderella pumpkin, this traditional French variety resembles the carriage she took to the ball. Perfect for decor or making pie.

## 5 sweet-tasting winter squash

Sow these flavoursome varieties now to enjoy cooking with them in autumn:

### 'Buttercup'

A fabulous squash with striped dark skin and tasty orange flesh that is sweet and nutty and excellent for soups and roasting. Even better, the skin is edible.

### 'Crown Prince'

Perfect for Sunday family meals, this sizeable grey-blue squash has delicious orange flesh. It stores exceptionally well, often keeping until May.



'Crown Prince'



'Jack Be Little'

### 'Jack be Little'

Sending this mini pumpkin up teepees brightens the vegetable patch. The fruits taste great and their size makes them versatile in the kitchen.

### 'Honeyboat'

An exciting alternative to butternut squash, this large heirloom variety has delicious flesh and the striped skin can be eaten. It also stores well.



'Honeyboat'

### 'Uchiki Kuri'

A reliable, hardy, orange-red squash with a sweet chestnut flavour; its trailing habit means it can be grown up climbing frames.



### Growing squash for the kitchen

Laden with vitamins A and C and having delicious orange flesh, many winter squashes will light up your autumn cooking repertoire. Since a lot of squashes store well, you could still be using

them in spring. The dense flesh has a sweet, nutty taste and can be boiled, baked, sautéed or - even better - roasted. Cut into slices and dressed with oil, herbs and maple syrup, it's moreish after 20 minutes in the oven.

If you don't have a big family, opt for small to medium-sized varieties. For example, 'Blaze', 'Uchiki Kuri', 'Sunshine' and 'Green Hokkaido' can achieve roughly the girth of a Galia melon, have a high yield, and taste wonderful! Small cultivars (such as 'Jack be Little') are fun in the kitchen because they can be roasted whole with herbs and served as a starter after slicing off the top; alternatively, scoop out their flesh and use them as soup bowls.

### Autumnal decor

Many gourds and squashes make lovely autumn decoration for the house. The French heirloom variety 'Musquee de Provence' is arguably the most stylish pumpkin, with its deeply ribbed skin; 'Turk's Turban' is also gorgeous, having white, green and red colouring and a turban-like cap, while 'Autumn Wings' is a mix of warty miniature swan-neck gourds that grow in incredible shapes and colours.



'Musquee de Provence' is an Insta-worthy specimen!