

PLANET FOOD

October 2002

SQUASHES & PUMPKINS

1. EDITORIAL



My first memory of pumpkins is having them gouged out with faces and a candle inserted in them for Halloween. We had them on the window-sill in our dormitory at school – something that would not be allowed nowadays. My children love Halloween, although they usually manage to get a grown up to do the gouging out task, because it's hard work. We then set up the gruesome pumpkin faces in our cellar and get excited visitors to accompany us on a ghostly tour. We also bake the seeds, adding only a bit of oil and salt and eat them.

As a child we often ate marrow and courgettes but only recently have I discovered the joys, both in taste and visual appearance of a vast array of other squashes. This month I have interviewed a number of people who are pumpkin or squash enthusiasts to hear why and how they grow them, as well as what they like about them.

2. WHAT ABOUT SQUASH

Proud of my compost heap

Fergus Dowding is an award winning organic gardener. He particularly loves growing vegetables, whilst his wife Louise is more interested in flowers.

Fergus's compost heap is covered in a spectacular sprawl of squash plants. This year he has chosen to grow *Red Onion* and *Uchi kuri*, a sort of butternut squash. They are apparently ready to pick now, but Fergus likes to wait until the first frost, so their skins thicken up, which means that they store for longer.

Squashes, Fergus points out are unusual in that you can grow them directly on your compost heap when it is rotting down and unuseable for anything else. They are also a vegetable that you can eat all winter, which is not easy to find. And they look



beautiful too – Fergus puts them on his window sills where they are happy to be warm and dry. He says that apart from onions and garlic, most other vegetables prefer it to be cool and dry.

I pointed out that my squashes had been eaten by slugs this year – I have had a really slug army in my garden and no time to slug hunt. Fergus says that normally squashes are not that tasty to a slug but this year there have been an exceptionally crop of slugs because of the wet Spring weather.

‘Squash’, Fergus jokes, ‘are like humans, they look very healthy until their fruits have ripened (had children) and then they tend to go off!’ They get moulds and mildew but this is not a problem.

A passion for pumpkins

Pauline Pears, the Head of Information at HDRA – the organic organisation, is passionate about pumpkins and squashes. She is keen to point out that pumpkins are not just for Halloween, although it can be difficult to buy them at other times of year. Well ripened, in the late summer they can last all year. And they are a brilliant food source, very nutritious, digestible, good for babies and delicious. But the varieties that are grown for Halloween are not so good to eat because they are grown for their size and suitability for scooping out. The best varieties for eating have a dense flesh or thick walls.

To store squashes for a long time you need a hot dry autumn, like the one we have been having this year. Pauline stores hers up her stairs – she had 42 last year. She says that it is then easy to see if any of them have a bit of rot on them and need to be eaten. It is also good and airy.

One squash that has become very popular in recent years is the butternut – it has a very sweet flesh – and is the most commonly sold variety. But most butternuts sold in this country are actually imported from South Africa. This is probably because, although they can be grown here, they are better suited to warmer climates. But Pauline says that she doesn’t think pumpkin growing could be easier. They like a bit of well rotted manure, or compost, to be planted when the ground is warm and contrary to common belief do not need continuous watering. Pauline waters them when planting but not after that. She thinks people think they need to water a lot because it is necessary if you want to grow giant fruits (which aren’t so good for eating). Regular feeding isn’t required either. She has grown a total of 20kg of pumpkins on a large heap of autumn leaves, collected the previous autumn.

Some of the squashes that Pauline grows are:

- *Buttercup, Pompeon or Sweet Mama*, which are similar varieties – boxy, square, dark green and thick fleshed, they are not great rompers.
- *Blue Kuri*, one of Pauline’s favourites – they have a grey blue skin and bright orange flesh, a beautiful contrast and are good to eat. The nearest to this variety in *The Organic Gardening Catalogue* is *Blue Ballet*.
- *Turk’s Turban*, which although not as good to eat is edible and it looks fun – like a Turk’s hat or a baboon’s bottom.

- *Gem Store F!*, which is a gentle plant with little round cricket ball squashes.
- *Acorn squash*: a huge beautiful bush with scalloped edged fruit.

One of the fun things about squashes is that they can be grown up trees or trellises, so you can see the fruits dropping down. Pauline is also keen to point out the tremendous variety of things you can make with them. She is not keen on pumpkin pie, but loves the chutneys, curries, breads, soups, drinks and breakfast mix that can be made with squashes. She says they go well with sharp things like tomatoes, garlic and lemon. And that pumpkins and winter squash freezes well in chunks, if you can't use up the whole fruit in one go. Baking it before freezing intensifies the flavour.

Gourmet seeds

'Italy is not just a country, it is a way of life and people want to buy into that'

Paolo Arrigo is a second generation Italian, living in London. His parents run an Italian delicatessen and his brother a coffee company. Paolo and his Venetian wife set up *Seeds of Italy*, importing Italian seeds through *Franchi Sementi* (founded in 1783) because they couldn't find many of them in the UK. In Italy, apparently it is common for people to grow much of their own produce, with things like tomatoes, peppers and squashes – even a flat in Milan will come with an allotment.

Paolo enthuses about his 'gourmet seeds'. He points out that Italian ingredients are some of the best in the world – best for flavour. And his company is unusual in selling, not just through garden centres but through delicatessens as well. This all started in 1998 and has apparently roller balled since then.

So far, organic is only a small part of the range – they offer *Marina de Chioggia* (Chioggia is near Venice, where there are lots of vegetables). These squash are not particularly attractive to look at but have a very good flavour. Paolo says that he tends to roast his but his aunt likes to make them into ravioli, adding nutmeg and parmesan, which is a traditional thing to do with pumpkins in the Piemonte region of Italy.

3. WE GROW WHAT WE LIKE

Interview with Jane Brooke from Merrick's Organic Farm



Jane and her husband Simon gave up commuting to London from Epsom and working respectively as a landscape architect and insolvency practitioner. In 1992 they bought a farm and started selling their organic produce in 1994.

At the beginning they sold a small range of vegetables, chosen on the basis of what they liked. This included squash. Now they sell over 110 different fruit and vegetable varieties, predominantly through a box scheme.

Squashes have become more popular over the years. But Merrick's Farm have stopped growing some varieties because customers didn't like them – essentially ones that looked fantastic but didn't taste of much. These included *Acorn Squash*, *Gem Rolet* and *Turk's Turban*, which, Jane says, once you hack the skin off, there is nothing left. And they don't sell pumpkins any more. People want them primarily for Halloween and so are not that interested in paying more for them to be organic.

Jane says that the summer squashes, like courgettes have softer skins than the winter squashes, which store better. Summer and winter squashes that she grows include:

- *Crookneck squash*, which is a warty looking yellow bent courgette.
- A range of *patti pans*, also called *scallopini* or *Sunburst*, which are like a squashed Frisbee but with a crimped edge and come in white, green and yellow.
- *Spaghetti squash*, which goes out with a recipe leaflet. You prick it with a fork, bake it until it gives to the touch, then cut it in half across the middle, scrape the seeds out and pull out the fibres to eat like spaghetti.
- *Delicata*, which is small and white with green stripes and a pale yellow flesh in side which tastes like sweet potato. Along with *Sweet Dumpling*, *Delicata* will not last beyond Christmas.
- The most long-lasting ones are *Sweet Mama*, *Buttercup* and *Hockidod*, which are all fairly dense fleshed and boring to look at.
- A really huge one is the *Queensland Blue* or *Crown Prince*, which is grey blue colour and weighs up to 14lbs piece. Merrick's Farm sell them in segments, but if they were not cut up they would last to the end of May and some customers order 20 for the winter. There is very little wastage with these squash and they can be used to make cakes, scone, ravioli, gnocci, amongst other things, as well as soup 'like velvet'.
- *Butternut Squash* are included in the Merrick's Farm box through popular demand, although Jane says that they are not particularly suited to the climate here and therefore are not as sweet as they can be.

4. WHAT YOU CAN DO.....

1. **REMEMBER THAT PUMPKINS ARE NOT JUST FOR HALLOWEEN.**
2. **TRY OUT SOME UNUSUAL VARIETIES.**
3. **BUY SQUASH AND STORE FOR A WINTER VEGETABLE (they will only store well if ripened beforehand).**

5. SQUASH CONTACTS

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ORGANIC GARDENING CATALOGUE
www.organicCatalog.com .

01932 253666

The booklet *Pumpkin & Squash surprises* is available from the Organic Gardening Catalogue (£1.20).