

How to pick the perfect pumpkin

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It takes a lot to grow the perfect pumpkin. Farmers choose varieties with excellent color, shape and size. They manage insects, diseases and weeds. Pumpkins need just the right amount of fertilizer and water. Beehives are placed into fields to ensure good pollination.

Did you know that a female flower (yes, there are female and male flowers) must be visited at least 8-10 times by a bee carrying pollen for fruit set to take place? The more bee visits, the more pollination and the larger and better shape of the fruit.

After all that, a grower might have 1,000 to 2,000 excellent fruit on an acre, all ready for you to choose. But what should you be looking for? How can you select the perfect pumpkin? Here's a list of things to look for when choosing your Halloween pumpkins.

First, don't wait too long to get your pumpkin. Growers in the Finger Lakes region already have pumpkins available and this year's crop looks great. If the crop has been grown well, a pumpkin will last until Halloween and beyond. And if you go early, you can have your choice of the best fruit.

If getting the pumpkins direct from the field, go before the first frost. Frosted pumpkins will develop a "frost ring" around the top of the fruit. Once frosted, the pumpkins will have a shorter shelf life. We've had some spotty frost in the area but few if any fields were affected. If going to a Pick-Your-Own, make sure you wear gloves, long sleeves and long pants. Pumpkins have spiny stems that irritate bare skin.

Most farms will have a wide variety of shapes and sizes to choose from, from 1/2-pound



Photo illustration

Munchkins to 100-pound and larger mammoths. For the most part, size really doesn't matter too much in terms of lasting ability. Whatever the size, look for fruit that are firm to the touch without any obvious soft spots or rots. Don't choose a fruit with a fresh wound as that can allow rot organisms to enter. Scrapes that have healed or callused over are fine.

Look for fruit that are uniform in color, but even a fruit that is 50 percent orange will ripen completely in 1 to 3 weeks, depending on the temperature. More important than color is the hardness of the rind. Make sure the fruit is firm and cannot be pierced easily

with your thumbnail. If vines die early due to disease, fruit may turn pale orange but not be truly mature. If the rind can be pierced easily, it's too soft and will only get softer. Avoid it.

Always pick up pumpkins by putting your hand underneath the fruit. It's tempting to grab the stem, which is actually called the handle. But handles can break and that could lead to rot. Speaking of handles, make sure they are firm and not rubbery. A rubbery handle indicates that disease organisms are making their way from the stem into the fruit. Be gentle with the pumpkins. Don't drop them into wagons or

trunks. It will only bruise them.

Intact pumpkin can last many weeks, but once carved for a Jack-o-lantern, the fruit will last only 5 to 7 days, depending on the temperature. If you want them looking great for Halloween, don't carve until a few days beforehand. And finally, don't forget to keep the seeds for a nutritious snack. Baked and lightly salted, pumpkin seeds are a great source of protein, minerals and antioxidants. If you want to use a pumpkin to make pies, make sure you purchase small pie pumpkins that have been bred for that purpose and not the larger ones bred for Jack-o-lanterns.