

## Giant Pumpkins and Other Squash

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As we move into fall and spin rapidly towards Thanksgiving, many people start thinking of squash and pumpkins and now days seemingly pumpkin spice everything! Photos start showing up everywhere of the biggest pumpkin contest with winners frequently being in excess of 1,000 pounds and occasionally topping a ton. This column isn't about pumpkin spice, however, but rather about the lowly pumpkin and all it's relatives.

Pumpkins are nothing more than a squash or more commonly known world wide as a gourd. In botanical terms, they are cucurbits or belonging to the genus Cucurbita or the more widely recognized plant family of Cucurbitaceae. Now that we have that botany out of the way, let's talk about "our" squashes! Many of the pumpkins and squashes that we grow are Cucurbita pepo. This includes acorn squash, field pumpkins, summer squash, including zucchini. These are all just varieties of the same plant. They have the same genetic number and can crossbreed, although you won't know it until you grow out the seeds.

The term field pumpkin, though, is somewhat confusing as there are several other species, such as Cucurbita maxima that has varieties (cultivars) that are also called pumpkin. The well known butternut squash is in the maxima group. The canned pumpkins used in many pumpkin pies comes from a commercial squash, in fact perhaps even butternut squash. The squashes tend to be sweeter and less stringy and so are more desirable for this purpose. The USDA will allow virtually any squash from the pepo or maxima group to be used in the canned pureed pumpkins and still be called "100% pumpkin." If you saw some of these commercial pumpkins growing in the field, you may not recognize them as being future pumpkin pie! The pumpkins that we all know well, from jack-o-lanterns to homemade pumpkin pie, are of the pepo lineage however.

While there are gourds of some form found all around the world, the pumpkin and squash that we know is an all American (well, North and South American anyway) plant. By the time the Pilgrims arrived in the Americas, pumpkins and squash were being grown across much of what is now the lower 48 states, Mexico and Central America. Some of the Cucurbita species are short lived perennials, but in our climate, they will exist as annuals. The variation of size and type is incredible in this species however.

I think we've all looked at those giant pumpkins in the contests and thought that they didn't look very "pumpkiny"! Most of those giant pumpkins are going to be different cultivars of the Cucurbita maxima species. These pumpkin plants are treated like royalty. They have regular irrigation and heavy, regular doses of fertilizer of all kinds. Once a pumpkin starts to form all other fruit are removed and not allowed to develop so all energy goes into that one fruit. It's a crazy competitive world in the giant pumpkin growing circles!

Pumpkin is around 90% water as it is when it comes from the field. The rest is sugars and other carbohydrates, a small amount of protein, fat and fiber. Pumpkins are a good source of vitamin A including beta-carotene. A 3½ ounce serving of raw pumpkin will have nearly 50% of your daily requirement of vitamin A and nearly 30% of your beta-carotene. It also has a nice helping of vitamin C and many other vitamins. So whether you call it pumpkin and eat it in a pie, or squash and eat it baked, know that you are eating a true all-American food that has some pretty good nutritional value for you!