

Daily Union Article
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Title: Fallin' for Pumpkins

As you read this article, you will note that it is now officially FALL! With the season comes leaves changing colors, cooler evenings, vibrant mums and, of course – pumpkins!

All too often we use pumpkins solely as a festive fall decoration when indeed they have much more value than simply being “cute”. Pumpkins are also nutritious and versatile vegetable that can be used for soups, stews, breads and other hearty dishes.

The low calorie, nutritionally loaded pumpkin is high in fiber. It is also high in beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is converted to vitamin A in the body. Foods high in beta-carotene may reduce the risk of developing certain types of cancer and often protects against heart disease. One cup of cooked, boiled, drained, pumpkin with no added salt amounts to only 49 Calories, but yields 2g of protein and 3g of dietary fiber. Pumpkins are 90% water which is the reason they have minimal calorie content.

Although pumpkins originated in Central American, they have been a part of American cuisine for centuries. Today, most of the pumpkins processed in the United States are grown in Illinois – around 90-95%. October is the prime month for pumpkin harvesting – 80% of the year's crop is harvested in this month alone.

Pumpkins will store best when they have been picked at the height of their maturity. They can bruise easily, so handle with care. It is best to let pumpkins cure in the sun for a week to toughen the skin, then store them in a cool, dry place like a cellar or other location that would maintain a temperature of about 55°F.

When you purchase a pumpkin, make sure you are purchasing the type of pumpkin you need for how you intend to use it. “Jack-O-Lantern” or carving pumpkins are usually bred for their larger size and are not eating quality. The varieties used for decorating usually are coarse-grained or have a watery texture and can also taste pretty flat.

Pie or “sweet” pumpkins are best to use for cooking and baking. They are small, sweet, and meatier and have less stringy fiber than carving pumpkins. Look for a pumpkin with 1 to 2 inches of stem left. If the stem is cut down too short, the pumpkin will decay more quickly or may even be decaying at the time you purchase it. As mentioned previously, pumpkins are tender. Avoid purchasing ones that have blemishes and/or soft spots. The shape is really not important, but it should feel heavy for its size.

Since Illinois produces the majority of pumpkins grown in the United States, the University of Illinois Extension Service offers a wealth of information from seed selection and planting, to harvesting and preparing. Here is how their food specialists recommend pumpkin be prepared:

Preparing the Pumpkin

Spread newspaper over your work surface. Start by removing the stem with a sharp knife. If you are planning to roast the pumpkin seeds, smash the pumpkin against a hard surface to break it open. If not, cut in half with a sharp knife. In any case, remove the stem and scoop out the seeds and scrape away all of the stringy mass. A messy job, but it will pay off.

Cooking the Pumpkin:

Boiling/Steaming Method: Cut the pumpkin into rather large chunks. Rinse in cold water. Place pieces in a large pot with about a cup of water. The water does not need to cover the pumpkin pieces. Cover the pot and boil for 20 to 30 minutes or until tender, or steam for 10 to 12 minutes. Check for doneness by poking with a fork. Drain the cooked pumpkin in a colander. Reserve the liquid to use as a base for soup. Follow the steps outlined below in **Preparing the Puree**.

Oven Method: Cut pumpkin in half, scraping away stringy mass and seeds. Rinse under cold water. Place pumpkin, cut side down on a large cookie sheet. Bake at 350°F for one hour or until fork tender. Then follow the procedure outlined below in **Preparing the Puree**.

Microwave Method: Cut pumpkin in half, place cut side down on a microwave safe plate or tray. Microwave on high for 15 minutes, check for doneness. If necessary continue cooking at 1-2 minute intervals until fork tender. Continue as outlined below in **Preparing the Puree**.

Preparing the Puree

When the pumpkin is cool enough to handle, remove the peel using a small sharp knife and your fingers. Put the peeled pumpkin in a food processor and puree or use a food mill, ricer, strainer or potato masher to form a puree.

Pumpkin puree freezes well. To freeze, measure cooled puree into one cup portions, place in ridged freezer containers, leaving 1/2-inch headspace or pack into zip closure bags. Label, date and freeze at 0°F for up to one year.

Use this puree in recipes or substitute in the same amount in any recipe calling for solid pack canned pumpkin.

Source: <https://extension.illinois.edu/pumpkins/selection.cfm>

As a rule, one pound of raw, untrimmed pumpkin will make one cup of finished pumpkin puree. Homemade pumpkin puree can be used in place of canned pumpkin equally.

FACT: In the field of botany, pumpkins are classified as a fruit because they are a product of the seed-bearing structure of a flowering plant. However, since pumpkins

are less sweet and more savory from a culinary perspective, they are commonly classified and accepted as a vegetable – much like tomatoes are.

For more facts and healthy recipe options using pumpkins, call me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!