

Choosing the Right Pumpkin

Whether you grow your own pumpkins, shop for them at the pumpkin patch, grocery store or farmers market, you want to choose pumpkins that have reached full maturity.

Fully mature pumpkins have hard, tough rinds. Avoid the ones with sunken or moldy spots, cuts or punctures. Well-attached stems are important as well if you want your pumpkin to be displayed. When you get them put them in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place. A temperature of 45 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit is the best. If they are not bruised or damaged, they can keep for three to six months.

There are different varieties of pumpkins.

- Jack-O-Lantern or carving pumpkins are usually bred for their larger size and are not eating quality. These varieties have a coarse grain or a watery texture and they don't have any taste.
- Pie pumpkins are the best to use for cooking and baking. They are small, sweet and meatier and have less stringy fiber than carving pumpkins.

A fresh pumpkin is delicious and pretty easy to prepare. A medium five-pound pumpkin will give you about 4 ½ cups of cooked pumpkin. To cook a pumpkin, follow these steps:

- Rinse the pumpkin well and dry it with a clean towel or with paper towels.
- Using a long knife cut the pumpkin in half and then into wedges.
- Scoop out the insides and save the seeds for roasting.
- Cook the pumpkin wedges in boiling water, a steamer, a pressure cooker, in the oven or microwave. You will know when it is done when it is tender when pierced with a fork.
- Peel the pumpkin wedges leaving the soft pulp, then mash.
- Keep out only what you will use within three to four days. Put the rest of the cooked pumpkin in rigid containers leaving ½ inch headspace or a freezer bag, then label, date and freeze to use later.

You can also preserve your pumpkin, however freezing your pumpkin will result in a better product. If you do decide to can the pumpkin, you should not mash or puree it, but instead, leave it in chunks and pressure can it. It is important to always follow directions carefully when preserving your pumpkin by using researched-based recipes such as those found at the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

Pumpkins are very nutritious. One cup of cubed pumpkin has 30 calories. It is a good source of Vitamin A, Vitamin C and potassium. It has only 8 grams of carbohydrates.

Pumpkin Delight

1 15 oz. can pumpkin
3 eggs
¾ cup sugar
1 12 oz. can evaporated fat free milk
1 spiced caked mix
1 cup margarine or butter melted
1 cup chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 350°F.

In a mixing bowl combine pumpkin, eggs, sugar and milk. Mix well. Pour into greased 13x9 inch cake pan. Sprinkle spiced cake mix over pumpkin mixture. Pour melted butter or margarine over cake mix. Sprinkle chopped pecans over cake. Bake for 1 hour. Top with whipped topping if desired.

Adapted from: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Michigan State University Extension