

Growing Pumpkins



Hints and Tips



1. The seed bed should be loosened up and ideally have organic manure compost added and turned through the soil with a fork.
2. The soil should be slightly acidic (pH 5.8 to 6.5). If it is lower than this, you can add some lime by sprinkling it over the seed bed and turning it through the soil with a fork. This will raise the pH depending on how much lime you add.
3. Each seedling will grow into a vine that may require an area 6m x 6m in diameter. So remember when selecting your site, allow adequate room for this amount of growth. Also remember your plant won't do well if there are other plants too close by, as they will be competing for water and nutrients.
4. Sow seeds (pointing down) in a seed raising mixture about 10mm below the surface, keep moist but do not over water. Most fertile seeds will germinate in about 5 days. Soil temperature is important and if you want to ensure germination try to maintain soil temp at 15-18 degrees; this can be achieved either in a hot house or some people just find a warm spot like on top of the house water heater for example.
5. When the first true leaf appears (the third leaf), transplant the seedling into the desired garden bed (this is usually 7-10 days after germination). Decide the direction in which you want the vine to grow and place the seedling with the true leaf on the opposite side of the plant to where you want the pumpkin to grow. Be very careful when transplanting your seedlings, as they are sensitive and can get root shock so handle the tender plants gently.
6. Seedlings are like babies. They need protection for the first 6-8 weeks, particularly from wind and frost, but also from slug and snail damage. To protect them, construct a mini hot house around the individual plant by using 2 litre plastic bottles with the top third cut off and up ended over the individual plant. As soon as the seedlings touch the sides of the bottle, remove the bottles and erect wind breaks with tomato stakes and shade cloth to assist further growth.
7. The first female flowers will appear 8-10 weeks after the seed germinates. Female flowers can be recognised by the small pumpkin (about the size of a 20 cent piece) at their base.



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If you want to have more growing time, or compare the effects of naturally pollinated versus hand pollinated pumpkins; you can try hand pollinating a few female flowers. Hand pollination usually results in earlier pollination than would occur naturally and as a result, provides a longer growing season and potentially bigger pumpkins.

To do this, find a newly opened male flower early in the morning, pick off the outside petals exposing the stamen covered in pollen; find a female flower, gently prise apart the petals and swab the female stigma with the male stamen.

8. After 12 weeks the plant will have a main runner with side vines coming off at approximately 90 degrees. It is best if you can set a pumpkin on the main runner as you see fruit forming; curve the vine into an S bend with the fruit on the outside. This will reduce tension and stop the fruit growing over the vine and crushing it. Select the best pumpkin to keep and remove the rest. You can leave two or three pumpkins, but they will not grow as big as one by itself.

To determine the best one, measure the diameter of each pumpkin for approximately 3 weeks with a cloth tape to see which one is growing the fastest. Also look at their shape, the best ones are rounded, not asymmetrical.

9. Ideally prune your vines early (in the first 6-8 weeks) to discourage them overtaking your whole vegie garden. Don't let the vine grow more than 3-4 metres beyond the set fruit and don't let side shoots grow more than 3 metres. When pruning the vine, put the cut end into the soil to reduce water loss from the plant.



10. Feed the plants with fertiliser once or twice a week and keep moist but do not over water. Seedlings especially like a bit more phosphorus, but as the plant grows a more balanced fertiliser with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium is fine.

Water soluble fertiliser will be best and most quickly taken up by the plant. Be wary though, if you feed your vines too much, the fruit will literally split open. When it comes to fertilising, a little bit often, is what works best.

11. As the pumpkin grows, it may need to be turned 90 degrees away from the vine; otherwise it will grow over the vine and tear itself off. Move it a little bit each day, before it gets too big. As the pumpkin gets larger, you may need to cut some roots away from the vine that emerges from the stem, so the vine can lift over the pumpkin stem.

12. Pumpkins can sunburn, so it is a good idea if you can shade them during the hotter parts of the day; just throwing a white sheet over them can suffice.

13. If the vine is showing signs of rot when the pumpkin is mature, harvest it onto a pallet and store it in a dry place with good air flow.

