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THE STORY OF PLANTS: PUMPKIN

DANIEL MOUNT

AS I WRITE, WE ARE HAVING ONE OF THE FIRST WARM WEEKENDS of the summer: hot by our standards, in the upper 70s. The pumpkins are starting to swell on the vines in our field, a happy anticipation swells in me too, and a strange ominous feeling of dread. Not the dread of the coming fall rains with winter, a headless horseman, close behind, but the dread of pumpkin traffic. I am not talking about a parade of those orange autumnal fruits converted into golden carriages by a fairy godmother, but a fleet of SUVs, hybrids, and jalopies headed down our usually quiet country road to the fields pregnant with pumpkins. I can hardly blame the hundreds of pilgrims in their search for the best pumpkin for carving Jack-o-lanterns. Like them I become as earnest as Charlie Brown's friend Linus in my search for a Great Pumpkin, that magical giant fruit with a long and fecund history.

The cultivation of pumpkins can be traced as far back as 10,000 years to Central Mexico. The first pumpkins were probably cultivated for their nutritious seeds. By the time Europeans arrived on this continent, pumpkins and their close kin the squashes were widely cultivated from the Andes to New England. Already a large variety of forms were grown for their seed and their flesh which was eaten green or ripe. As a gift from the Native Americans to first settlers they quickly became a staple in the colonial diet. The early colonists filled the ripe fruits with spices, honey, and milk and baked them whole. This precursor to the modern pumpkin pie was on the table at the first Thanksgiving feast, making pumpkin pie truly more American than apple pie.

Pumpkins are in the genus *Cucurbita*, a genus of about 14 species, five of which have been in cultivation for millennia. The search for the original wild pumpkin has led some botanists to *Cucurbita texana*, though there is still debate as to whether this species is a reverted escapee from cultivation. Most pumpkins, along with the summer squashes, gourds, and acorn squashes, are cultivars of the species *C. pepo*. The Cinderella pumpkin, or 'Rouge Vif d'Etampes' and 'Atlantic Giant' pumpkin are actually winter squashes, cultivars of *C. maxima*, which produces the largest fruits on earth. The record pumpkin weighed in at 1,810 lbs. and 8 oz. in Minnesota last October.

The word *squash* is derived nearly intact from the Algonquin word *askoot-asquash* meaning "eaten green." The word *pumpkin*, I prefer the lazy vernacular *punkin*, has gone through many changes from the ancient Greek word *pepon*, meaning large ripe fruit, referring to melons and cucumbers, both Old World members of the Cucurbitaceae, or the pumpkin family.

In her definitive book *The Compleat Squash: A Passionate Grower's Guide to Pumpkins, Squashes, and Gourds* Amy Goldman coins the term *Cucurbitacean* for people "who regard pumpkins or squash with deep often rapturous love." The ceramic and gold replicas of squashes found in archaeological sites throughout the New World attest to the fact that this is not a new phenomenon. Michael and I, confirmed Cucurbitaceans, have planted over 25 varieties of pumpkins and squash this year. From the miniature white 'Lil' Pump-ke-mon' to the monstrous 'Wyatt's Wonder' the range of form and utility is wondrous. We love growing the beautiful Styrian pumpkins of Austrian origin 'Kakai' and 'Lady Godiva'. They produce copious amounts of "naked" seeds, known as *pepitas*, for roasting. We eat handfuls each October watching the parade of pumpkin heads on our road as we wait for November 1st and the return of normalcy to our sleepy hollow. 🍂

Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.