FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

PUMPKINS AND HALLOWEEN SAFETY

With Halloween right around the corner, it's time to head to the pumpkin patch to pick out the perfect pumpkin for your jack-o-lantern. But, wait...a pumpkin patch in Florida? It's true that pumpkins have not been widely produced in Florida. However, with new varieties, the crop has potential to be grown commercially or in your own backyard. Presently, pumpkins are shipped into Florida from more northern states and command premium prices in our local markets, especially at this time of year. Of course, it's too late to plant your own pumpkin patch for this year, but it's not too late to plan ahead for next year.

Pumpkins come in many shapes, sizes, and colors and are most widely used for jack-o-lanterns and for making pies. Pumpkins are a warm-season crop and do not tolerate frosts, which make them very suitable as a crop that follows your spring vegetable crops. In order to have pumpkins in time for Halloween, they should be seeded in your garden by July 4th. "Howden" and "Jackpot" are the two best varieties for jack-o-lantern pumpkins in Florida.

Pumpkins grow on vines and therefore need plenty of space to grow - at least 6 feet in each direction. So, I'm sorry to say that pumpkin container gardens are out of the question. A relatively large backyard garden is needed. Pumpkins require moderate fertilization and need regular watering to ensure uniformly shaped leaves. It is best to let only two fruit to grow on each vine. This will allow them to reach a fairly large size. All other fruit that begin to grow after the first two should be removed.

Harvest your pumpkins when the rind surface is hard and the fruits have developed full color. The fruits should be clipped from the vine leaving a 3 to 4 inch stem, making the fruits desirable for jack-o-lanterns. Pumpkins can be stored for only a few weeks. Storing pumpkins any longer than a month can be difficult. They need to be stored in a dry, cool place, which will ensure their longevity until you are ready to carve them.

By growing your own pumpkins next year, not only will you be proud of your garden's accomplishments, you will save money by not having to pay the premium price of northern grown pumpkins.

Not only are pumpkins a sign of Halloween, so are costumes and trick-or-treating. Halloween is a time of fun for children. The Central Florida "FightBAC!" Food Safety Education Partnership* is providing a few simple food tips for parents to ensure that their children's holiday is a safe and healthy one, too.

**TIPS FOR PARENTS**

- Children shouldn't snack while they are out trick-or-treating, before parents have a chance to inspect the goodies. To help prevent children from munching, give them a snack or light meal before they go - don't send them out on an empty stomach.
- Tell children not to accept - and, especially, not to eat - anything that isn't commercially wrapped.
- When children bring their treats home, discard any homemade candy or baked goods. Parents of young children should also remove any choking hazards such as gum, peanuts, hard candies, small toys or candies in small cups or containers. Anything 1.75 inches or less can pose a choking hazard to children 3 and under.
- Wash all fresh fruit thoroughly, inspect it for holes, including small punctures, and cut it open before allowing children to eat it.
- Inspect commercially wrapped treats for signs of tampering, such as an unusual appearance or discoloration, tiny pinholes or tears in wrappers. Throw away anything that looks suspicious.
- If juice or cider is served to children at Halloween parties, make sure it is pasteurized or otherwise treated to destroy harmful bacteria. Juice or cider that has not been treated will say so on the label.
Enjoy your Halloween festivities and by following these few simple guidelines it will help to ensure the safety of you and your child(ren) while trick-or-treating.

For more information on pumpkins or Halloween safety, please contact the Osceola County Extension Service at (407) 846-4181. The Master Gardeners are available to take your plant questions on Mondays from 2pm to 5pm and on Thursdays from 9am to noon. Christy Walter is available to answer your food safety questions.

Members: Florida Department of Health, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Albertson's, Florida Environmental Health Association and the Food & Drug Administration.

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Date: October 27th, 2002