Time to find the perfect pumpkin

Now that I am a grandparent, I am already planning activities for the grandkids as they get older. One activity, for sure, will be a trip to a local pumpkin patch. It does not matter one's age, all of us enjoy going to the pumpkin patch.

My early trips to the pumpkin patch were with my grandfather. Since he planted the pumpkins in the “back forty” the trip would also be a fun wagon ride past the hog lot, through the chicken yard, across the hayfield, along the woods, until we reached the back recesses of the farm.

There would be the patch of deep orange pumpkins of all sizes — ripe for the picking.

Grandpa had the same deal each year: If I assisted loading the pumpkins on the wagon, he would allow me to pick several to carve into jack-o-lanterns.

Pumpkins have long been a staple on farms throughout America. They are one of the many crops that are indigenous to North America. Native Americans had cultivated pumpkins for many centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Seeds have been discovered in Mexico that date back to 7000 BC.

Pumpkins were an important food staple for Native Americans along with corn and beans. Most parts of the pumpkin are edible, including the fleshy shell or rind, seeds, leaves, and flowers.

Pumpkins are warm season annuals and the seeds will not germinate in cool soils. Seeds or transplants should not be planted until soil temperatures reach 60 degrees.

Pumpkins produce both male and female flowers, so good polination is critical for fruit production. Male flowers generally are the first to be seen. Pollinators such as bees are required for pollination.

Pumpkins thrive well in many soil types and adapt to many growing conditions. Wet soils and cool weather are the two most common environmental conditions that adversely affect pumpkin production.

Fruit production will be reduced if summer temperatures turn cool. Pumpkins will not tolerate cold temperatures and vines will be killed at the first fall frost.

Pumpkins come in many colors besides the typical orange. Rinds may be orange to red to blood red, or white to salmon to blue-gray.

Pumpkins, squash and gourds are all members of the Cucurbita family. What most people call a pumpkin belongs to a subgroup of the Cucurbita family scientifically called Cucurbita pepo.

It is difficult to separate the species. Some parts of the world refer to all types as squash. I like Texas A&M’s practical definition that a pumpkin is something you carve, a squash is something you cook, and a gourd is something you look at.

The typical carving pumpkins are generally derived from the “Connecticut Field” cultivar.

Over a billion pounds of pumpkin are grown each year in the U.S. Ohio is one of the top five pumpkin-producing states. Other top states include Illinois, California, Pennsylvania and New York.

Many of us do not have a farm where we can grow our own pumpkin patch. Fortunately, agritourism has become an important industry, which often provides pumpkin patches for public enjoyment.

Homestead Farms near Alva and Suter’s near Pandora both have pumpkin patches for the general public.

Pumpkins have also been a fall staple at Wolfe’s Produce, east of Findlay on Ohio 37, for decades. They have already been picked, but an individual will have a large selection of different pumpkins and gourds. One can see their locally-grown pumpkin patches near the store.

Now is a good time to find a great carving pumpkin from local farms in our area. The Hancock County Master Gardener Volunteers from Ohio State University Extension provide these tips for selecting the ideal carving pumpkin:

- Select a pumpkin that is fairly light in weight for its size and is slightly flat on the bottom. Lighter pumpkins have less “meat” in the rind and are easier to carve.
- Choose a pumpkin with a good stem.
- Store pumpkins at temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees until ready to carve.

Finding the right carving pumpkin is a great family activity. I remember as a young boy it seemed like a long trip with my grandfather to the pumpkin patch — but that perfect pumpkin was worth the trip.

I do not remember any of the specific pumpkins that I carved as a young boy, but I cherish the time spent and memories of my grandfather.

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Lentz is extension educator for agriculture and natural resources for The Ohio State University Extension Service in Hancock County. He can be reached at 419-422-3851 or via email at lentz.38@osu.edu.

Lentz can be heard with Vawn Wickerham on weekdays at 6:35 a.m. on WFIN, at 5:43 a.m. on WKXA-FM, and at 5:28 a.m. at 106.3 The Fox.