

Pumpkins were used for medicinal purposes by First Nations

By John Arnott

That pumpkin you're about to carve into a Halloween jack-o-lantern has a history dating back to prehistoric times.

Seeds from pumpkin-like squash, dating from between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago, have been found in Mexico, where it is believed most squash, and pumpkins, a naturally hybridized variety of squash, originated.

Usually deep yellow to orange with a smooth but more often lightly ribbed shells, pumpkins have the botanical name cucurbita ?

Latin for gourd, pepo from the Greek pepon meaning large melon. Our name comes from pepon to pompon in France through pumpkin in England finally becoming pumpkin in English speaking colonial North America.

In the last few years, white or ghost pumpkins have become popular. There are green coloured pumpkins as well.

All pumpkins are classed as winter squash and now go by that name in Britain and Australia-New Zealand.

This North American native is today grown worldwide with Canada, United States, China and India being the largest producers.

Pumpkins here in our area are a warm-weather crop with seeds being planted from mid June to early July when the top three inches of soil is at least 15.5 C. Pumpkins need a good amount of moisture to grow well, thus the growing soil must retain water, but not be soggy. Plants do poorly in sandy soil or soil that's badly drained. They also need to grow full sun. Pumpkin plants are ground lying, bristly-stemmed vines that produce both male and female flowers and large, edible, gently-lobed leaves. The large hibiscus-like male yellow flowers, also edible, attract pollinators, especially the squash bees (peponapis pruinosa), but due to wide use of pesticides, these bees have dramatically declined and honey bees have taken their place. But with honey bees becoming scarce, hand pollination in some areas is now necessary.

For thousands of years, First Nations people grew the squash we call pumpkin as food, even roasting and eating the seeds.

Medicinally, it was to treat intestinal worms and urinary problems. All this they shared with the incoming European colonists.

Modern veterinarians use pumpkin extract to treat cats for hairballs and both dogs and cats for constipation and diarrhoea.

Today, pumpkins are grown commercially as animal feed and for ornamental use, such as those often intricately-carved jack-o-lanterns (in the British Isles where jack-o-lanterns originated, they were usually carved from turnips). The seeds of the green pumpkin are used to produce an unsaturated oil for cooking, healthy salad dressings and for herbal medicines.

The extremely large pumpkins, that can weigh hundreds of pounds, and are best known in pumpkin growing contests, originated from the cucurbita maxima ? Latin for large species, which horticulturists found growing in South America. It is related to the pepo, which is probably its main ancestor.

The idea of using pumpkin as a pie filling came from pioneer times, when once the seeds had been removed the pumpkin ?meat? was mashed inside the shell and mixed with cream, honey and spice or cinnamon/cassia, then baked. Surprisingly, today most commercially sold pumpkin pie filling is made from other types of squash most often the butternut variety.