Of all the groups in the vegetable kingdom, none can rival pumpkins and squashes for the diversity of shape, size and color. Heirloom festival. All have hard rinds and firm flesh and can be stored for use during the winter months.

**History:** pumpkin seeds estimated to date back to 7,000BC have been found in cave in Mexico

Edible pumpkins and squash grew in Africa, China and India as early as the 6th Century.

In the family **Cucurbitacea.**

Fruit is botanically a berry: it is a simple fruit with a pulpy flesh that does split to reveal the seeds.

**Monoecious –** have separate male and female flowers on the same plant.

There are about 27 **species** of Cucurbita and the majority fall into 3 species Cucurbita maxima, moschata and pepo.

Most easily distinguished by their fruit stems:

***Maxima*** – have large corky stems which are round and larger at the base nearest the fruit.

***Moschata*** - stems are angled and fleshy rather than rounded or ropy opening out towards the fruit becoming star shaped and knobby.

***Pepo -*** are ridged around, widening slightly at the base.

The **pepo** are actually classified as **Autumn squashes** as they do mature in the Fall but do not store very long – acorn and spaghetti and most pumpkins.

**Winter squashes** – maxima and moschata (butternuts, hubbards, kabouchas can keep up to a year or maybe even two.

Dense dry flesh that is ideally suited to culinary uses. Unlike pumpkins which are more watery and have grainier texture.

**Good cooking pumpkins** are sugar or pie pumpkins (eg Connecticut Field, Long Island Cheese, Cinderella pumpkin). Not the big guys used for carving and decorations. What Libbys grows is moschata so technically speaking not a pumpkin at all but a squash.

**CULTIVATION**

Species will not cross pollinate, varieties within a species will. Each cultivar needs an isolation of least half a mile. So many open pollinated varieties are unstable and therefore seed saving is difficult.

**Sow in late spring** (April/May), not too early as they are sensitive to frost. And as they grow quickly, you don’t want to be stuck protecting giant squash plants waiting to be planted outside.

**Planting:** Usually large vines, sow 2 feet apart. Can plant directly 2-3 inches deep. Prefer to plant in 4” pots to start them off.

Hard to grow in containers. Square Foot Gardening – recommends growing them vertically which helps with mildew.

**Requirements:** Need plenty of sun and water and try not to get water on leaves as very susceptible to mildew.

Rich soil – amended with compost.

**Diseases**: Slugs, powdery mildew, squash bugs (hand picking, neem oil on egg clusters and juveniles, row covers) Delay planting until later in summer natural enemies of squash bugs become more numerous

**Harvest:** Ready to harvest 60 -110 days after sowing. When can’t make a dent with fingernail and the vines dying back. Harvest with a piece of stem attached but don’t hold it by the stem. You want to protect that point so it is not an entry point for decay. Jim – paints with a 10% bleach solution.

Ideal storage temps: cool dry place 40-50 degrees.

**How to prepare:**

Not eaten raw.

Cut in half, scoop out seeds and prepare for boiling or baking. Excellent served mashed, soups and stews or some for pies such as butternut.

Roast: Cut in large chunks or cut in half. 400 degrees for approx. 45 mins.

Steam: Cut in wedges. 25 minutes.

Boil: Cut in wedges and boil in salted water for about 20 minutes.

Microwave: Cut in wedges. Microwave on high for 5 minutes.

Grill: Peel and cut in 1 inch cubes. Rub with oil. Grill on high 5 minutes each side.

**Recipes:**

Butternut Squash Soup (Debra Howell)

Homemade Pumpkin Puree

Carmelized Orange Pumpkin Flan

Pumpkin Couscous salad