**Pumpkin**

1. **What is a pumpkin**
   1. The pumpkin belongs to the vine crops or gourd family, cucurbits, which also includes cucumber, gourd, muskmelon, squash, and watermelon
      1. The name pumpkin originated from “pepon” the Greek word for “large melon”
      2. The French changed it to pompon, the English to pompion, and the American colonists to pumpkin
      3. Native Americans called pumpkins “isqoutum squash”
   2. Although it is often thought of as a vegetable, it is actually a fruit
   3. There are many varieties of pumpkins, some small, some large
      1. Small varieties, weighing 2 to 5 pounds, include the Baby Bear, Small Sugar, Spooktacular, or Winter Luxury
      2. Intermediate varieties, growing to 8 to 15 pounds, include Autumn Gold, Harvest Moon, and Jack-o-Lantern
      3. Large varieties, weighing 15 to 25 pounds, include Big Autumn, Ghost Rider, Happy Jack, and Jumpin’ Jack
2. **History of Pumpkin**
   1. Pumpkins originated in Central America
   2. Seeds from pumpkin relatives dating back to 7000-5500 B.C. have been discovered in Mexico
   3. In North America, pumpkins have been grown for about 5000 years
   4. Native Americans cultivated pumpkins long before any settlers arrived
      1. They used pumpkin in a variety of ways: the seeds provided food and medicine and the flesh was cut into long strips, dried, and made into mats
   5. When the Pilgrims settled in Massachusetts in the 1600s, pumpkins soon became a staple of the their diet and are thought to have helped these early settlers survive
   6. Pumpkins were once recommended for removing freckles and curing snake bites
   7. In early colonial times, pumpkins were used for the crust of pies, not the filling
   8. Pumpkin pies originated from a different colonial preparation, which involved slicing off the top, removing the seeds, filling the inside with milk, spices, and honey, and baking it whole in the hot ashes of an open fire
3. **Nutrition & Health Benefits of Pumpkin**
   1. Pumpkin is low in calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium
   2. It is also an excellent source of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals
   3. The bright orange color is a hallmark of the important antioxidant, beta-carotene
      1. Beta-carotene is one of a group of red, orange, and yellow pigments called carotenoids
      2. Carotenoids are provitamin A compounds, or precursors to vitamin A, which basically means that they are able to be converted to vitamin A by our bodies
      3. Think of carotenoids as food sources of vitamin A; some carotenoids are better sources of vitamin A than others
      4. Of all the carotenoids, beta-carotene provides the most vitamin A, which is critical for vision and helps to maintain immune function, and healthy lungs, bones, and skin
4. Equally important, research suggests that beta-carotene may reduce the risk of some cancers, particularly breast cancer in premenopausal women and ovarian cancer in postmenopausal women
5. Beta-carotene in combination with specific other nutrients has also shown promise in treating eye diseases, such as cataracts and age-related macular degeneration (AMD)
6. There is also evidence that beta-carotene may help to improve physical performance and strength in the elderly
   1. Other related antioxidants found in pumpkin include alpha-carotene and lutein
      1. Alpha-carotene is another carotenoid and provitamin A compound
      2. It is also an antioxidant that protects cells from damage
      3. Lutein, yet another carotenoid, is thought to protect eye tissues from sunlight damage
   2. Pumpkin is also a good source of B vitamins folate and niacin
      1. Folate, or folic acid, helps the body make healthy new cells
      2. Niacin helps the digestive system, skin, and nerves to function
   3. Pumpkin seeds, or pepitas (peh-PEE-tahs), are a good source of protein, as well as vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids
7. **Selection, Storage, and Handling of Pumpkin**
   1. Pumpkins should feel firm and heavy or dense for their size, an indication of more edible flesh
   2. Also, pumpkins without stems do not keep well (at least 1- to 2-inch stems are desirable)
   3. Of course, choose a pumpkin that is unbruised; in addition, check for cracks or soft spots
   4. Though they do not require refrigeration, they should be stored in a cool, dry place; whole, unblemished pumpkins can be stored for 3-6 months at 40-45 degrees
   5. Pumpkin can also be preserved by canning, of course, or freezing
   6. To make your own puree, use smaller, sweeter varieties, such as Sugar Pie, Baby Bear, or Cheese Pumpkin
      1. Remove the stem, then scoop out the seeds and scrape away the stringy fibers
      2. To boil or steam, cut the pumpkin into large chunks
         1. Add to a large pot with water, cover, and boil for 20-30 minutes, or steam for 10 to 12 minutes until fork-tender
         2. Useful tip: boiling liquid can be used as a base for soup
      3. To roast, cut the pumpkin in half, and place cut side down on a greased baking sheet; bake in a 350° oven for 45- 75 minutes, or until fork tender
      4. In the microwave, cut pumpkin in half, and place cut side down on a microwave-safe dish; microwave on high for 15 minutes; if necessary cook for additional 2-minute intervals until fork-tender
      5. When cooled, remove from the peel, and puree using a food processor, food mill, ricer, strainer, or potato masher
      6. 1 pound of raw, untrimmed pumpkin yields about 1 cup of prepared puree
      7. Puree freezes well and can last for up to 1 year frozen
      8. Do not allow cooked pumpkin to sit at room temperature for more than 2 hours when making puree
   7. Complementary seasonings for sweet dishes include cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and cloves
   8. For savory dishes, onions, garlic, herbs and curry complement the sweet, earthy flavor of pumpkin
   9. To prepare the seeds, remove them from the flesh inside, rinse to remove the stringy fibers, place on an oiled baking sheet, sprinkle with salt, garlic powder, or other seasonings, and roast in a 400 degree oven until seeds are toasted but not burned
8. **Pumpkin Fun Facts**
   1. Pumpkins are about 90% water
   2. Each pumpkin contains an average of 500 seeds
   3. Like many fruits, pumpkins too are used in both sweet and savory dishes, from desserts to soups; even the flowers are edible
   4. Perhaps the most notorious fruit in folklore, the pumpkin is referred to in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater, Cinderella*, and in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* in it’s early English form “pumpion”
   5. They can range in size from less than 1 pound to over 1000 pounds, with the largest ever weighing in at 1,810 pounds (that’s equivalent to a dairy cow) at the nearby Stillwater Harvest Fest
   6. In 2010, U.S. growers produced over 1.5 billion pounds of pumpkin each year, valued at $190 million
   7. The same year, 496 million pounds of pumpkin came from Illinois alone!
   8. Top pumpkin producing states are Illinois, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan
   9. Though the peak season lasts from September to November, 80% of all pumpkins produced are available in October—perfect for Halloween Jack-o-lanterns
   10. Jack-o-lanterns have been made around Halloween for centuries, a tradition originating from an Irish myth about a man named “Stingy Jack”, who because of trickeries was not allowed into either Heaven or Hell.
       1. When he died, his soul was condemned to roam the night with only a burning coal to light his way, which he held in a carved out turnip.
       2. The Irish referred to this ghostly figure as “Jack of the Lantern”
       3. In Ireland and Scotland, people began to make their own versions of Jack’s lantern by carving scary faces into turnips or potatoes and placing them near windows or doors to ward off Stingy Jack and other wandering evil spirits
       4. In England, large beets were used
       5. Irish, Scottish, and English immigrants brought the jack-o-lantern tradition with them to the U.S.
       6. Now, 46% of Americans report carving a pumpkin for Halloween
       7. The pumpkin is the state fruit of New Hampshire, in which the city of Keene holds the world record for the most lit pumpkins in one location: 28,985
   11. Just one slice of pumpkin pie provides nearly 250% the daily value of vitamin A
   12. The largest pumpkin pie ever baked weighed 2,020 pounds
   13. While a small percentage of pumpkins are grown for ornamental sales through you-pick farms, farmers’ markets, and retail sales, the majority are grown primarily for processing—making them available year-round!
9. **Pumpkin Activities**
   1. Look at different varieties of pumpkin
   2. Some varieties are better suited for cooking and baking than others
      1. Some field varieties will be too fibrous and stringy
      2. Winter Luxury and Triple Treat are good for cooking
      3. Sweeter varieties for baking include Sugar Pie, Baby Bear, or Cheese Pumpkin