

Enjoy Eating Pumpkin

As the calendar turns to October, the air will start to cool, pumpkin food and beverages will be featured, it'll get darker earlier, and autumn plans will fill the calendar! Pumpkins, it seems, are everywhere this time of year.

What can you do with a pumpkin? There are endless possibilities! All pumpkins are squash, but not all squash are pumpkins, and not all pumpkins are created equally! The big jack-o'-lantern orange pumpkins you typically see on everyone's porches in the fall aren't the best variety for baking or eating. They are stringy, bland, watery, and contain huge seeds. Before you get to cooking, it's important to pick the right type of pumpkin. You want to buy 'sugar pumpkins' or 'pie pumpkins.' Pie pumpkins have smaller cavities with sweet, dense, and smooth textured flesh. The skins are thin enough that you can even eat them after cooking. Select pumpkins between 3-8 pounds. If the big carving pumpkins are the only ones available, choose a winter squash like butternut squash instead for the best results.

Pumpkin is more than just the unofficial flavor of fall. Pumpkins are delicious and healthy if you buy the right kind. While most pumpkins are orange, they also come in white, blue, yellow, and other colors. The bright orange color of pumpkin is a giveaway that pumpkin is loaded with an important antioxidant, beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is a plant carotenoid that is converted to vitamin A in the body. Pumpkins are also rich in potassium. Pumpkin is low in calories. One cup of cubed pumpkin has 30 calories.

Here are five easy tips to pick the best pumpkins and make sure they stay fresh.

Variety

For cooking, you'll want to use sugar pumpkins (also called pie or sweet pumpkins), which are small and round. It should be bright-colored, firm, and heavy for its size.

Healthy Stem

Find a pumpkin with a well-attached, one or two-inch brown, dry stem. Pumpkins with shorter stems decay more quickly. This indicates it's mature enough to be harvested, but don't use it as a carrying handle. The stem can break off, tearing the shell and leaving it susceptible to rot.

Examine

Look for deep cuts, bruises, and soft spots, which are all signs of damage or rot. Don't overlook the bottom of the pumpkin. Turn the pumpkin upside down and place pressure on the bottom with your thumbs. If it flexes or gives, your pumpkin is not fresh.

Color

A pumpkin's hue will dull as it ages, but the flesh inside will still be sweet and edible if the skin is unblemished and free of bruises or spoilage.

Storage

Pumpkins are a great fall and winter vegetable because they do not have to be stored in a refrigerator to be preserved. Whole pumpkins that you're not going to cook right away should be kept in a cool, dry place away from frost, insects, or rodents. They keep best at a temperature between 50° to 65°F.

Pumpkins should be scrubbed and rinsed with water before food preparation. Before cooking, remove the stem, scoop out the seeds, and scrape away the stringy pulp inside the pumpkin.

Pumpkins can be baked, boiled, microwaved, pressure-cooked, roasted, or steamed. Once cooked, it can be mashed, pureed, or cubed. In many recipes, you can prepare the pumpkin with the skin on and then remove the skin after cooking.

Once cut, they should be wrapped tightly, refrigerated, and used within five days. Puree or cube any leftovers and freeze them for later use.

Cooking with fresh pumpkin offers a world of culinary possibilities. Get a taste of fall with delicious autumn recipes using pumpkin to help you celebrate the season.