

# Gourmet Trail

## Pumpkins and the pumpkin patch

by Tonya Jennings – On the Ridge Cooking School

Pumpkins are a delightful sight in markets and green grocers and they epitomise winter comfort food. They look glorious in the pumpkin patch, with their trailing vines, peeking out from under heart-shaped leaves. They look equally good grown as decoration as well as for their crop and provide an excellent way to camouflage bare patches of ground, old fences and tree stumps.

My neighbour, Geoff, has a field of pumpkins and he supplies me with pumpkins all through the cold months. They are wonderful Kent pumpkins, with slightly ribbed, yellow-green, mottled skin and a sweet, nutty, deep yellow-orange flesh that tastes delicious. They currently decorate my kitchen, sitting atop the cupboards.

Pumpkins are available all year round, but they are at their prime in late autumn and winter. They belong to the 'cucurbit' or 'gourd' family.

The botanical classification of pumpkins is complicated because they belong to four different species of the cucurbita genus and varieties belonging to each of these species may also produce hybrids by cross-pollination, within and between the species. This is why pumpkins vary so much in size, shape and colour – weights can range from 1 to 50 kilograms!

Some of our pumpkin varieties include:

- Kent, with its sweet and nutty flavor, is great mashed.

- Butternut is bell-shaped with a smooth, beige skin and nutty flavour, perfect for soups.

- Golden nugget is a small, round pumpkin with deep orange skin and golden flesh. Its mild flavour and high ratio of seeds to flesh make it ideal for hollowing out, stuffing and baking.

- Jarrahdale is a large, grey pumpkin, easily peeled, with sweet, deep orange flesh that works well in curries.

- Minikin is one of the smallest varieties available, with golden skin and flesh, lots of seeds is another good choice for stuffing.

- Queensland blue is well known for its large size and grey skin; it is heavily ribbed and adds a full flavour to casseroles and stews.

- Sweet dumpling is smaller than the golden nugget, and has a mild-flavoured flesh that's perfect for roasting.

From a nutritional perspective, pumpkins are an excellent source of vitamin A, some calcium, phosphorus, potassium, thiamin and vitamin C. They are sodium and fat free, with 188 kilojoules per 100 grams. Pumpkin seeds and their oil are a good source of zinc and unsaturated fatty acids

Pumpkins are best harvested when the vines die off and the fruit is fully mature. The stalk should be dry and brittle, so that it snaps easily from the vine. They are more flavoursome when fully dry

and may be kept for several months in a dry, cool and well-ventilated spot.

When buying whole pumpkins, look for those with a hard, thick skin and those that feel heavy for their size. If purchasing pre-cut pumpkins, select flesh that is a bright yellow-orange without any discolouration. Once cut, remove the seeds, wrap in plastic wrap and store in the fridge for up to a week.

Every part of most varieties, from the chewy skin to the nutritious seeds called pepitas, can be cooked and eaten. They may be steamed, boiled in a little water, puréed, roasted, baked, braised or stuffed. Mashed pumpkins add moisture and texture when used in cake and muffin mixtures.

They are delicious in soups, pies, tarts, scones, breads, stews and even as a thickener for sauces. They may be served as a vegetable accompaniment to meat or poultry, served in pasta dishes and salads.

The southern Italians pickle pumpkin with garlic, olive oil, white wine vinegar and thyme. The sweet flesh can also be combined with cinnamon, maple syrup or cream for a delicious dessert. Pumpkin goes well with apples, bacon, cheese, chickpeas, coconut milk, garlic, ginger, lamb, nutmeg, onion, oranges, sage, spinach and tarragon.

In sweet dishes pumpkin is enhanced by ginger, cinnamon, brandy or rum.

The pumpkin flowers are also edible and can be stuffed, then shallow or deep fried and enjoyed as a starter or as part of an antipasto platter, in a similar way to zucchini flowers.

Pumpkin seeds are delicious as snacks and added to your muesli, and they make a good, less expensive alternative to pine nuts. You can roast them on a baking sheet in the oven at a low temperature, or toss them in a dry pan over medium heat, stirring often to avoid burning.

To add more flavour, soak the seeds in salt water before toasting. And finally there is pumpkin seed oil. Due to its strong flavour and colour, it is normally mixed with other oils for cooking or salad dressings.

At On the Ridge, in our Italianicious - Cooking with Passion class, we frequently include a roasted pumpkin stuffing for our fresh ravioli and in A Slice of the Hinterland, another class favourite and mine also, is a pumpkin tart with semi-dried tomatoes and mascarpone, made with parmesan pastry.

You will find this recipe on our website, [www.ontheridge.com.au](http://www.ontheridge.com.au)

