



# Giant Pumpkin Growing Basics

Joe Ailts, 2011



There are no secrets to growing a giant pumpkin; anyone can do it! Experts and record holders agree: pumpkin size ultimately comes down to the amount of time & energy you put into your patch. Follow the guidelines described in this article, and you'll be empowered with the proper knowledge to produce your very own giant pumpkin.

There are three aspects of growing that one needs to have in order to produce consistently large pumpkins. These are **good seed, good soil, & good weather**.

**Good seed.** The only way to grow a true giant is with the *Dill's Atlantic Giant* variety. Step #1 is to join a giant pumpkin club such as the St. Croix Grower's Association (see information below). This is your gateway to all things related to giant pumpkins, including the first requirement- good seed. Giant pumpkin clubs will put the best seeds in the hobby into your hands. Don't waste your time with store-shelf seeds or pricey Internet auctions. Club membership seed distributions are your gateway to affordable, reliable, top-quality seed.

**Good soil.** Pumpkins, like most garden veggies, prefer fertile soil with good drainage. Perform a soil test (~\$15 at the local co-op) and follow the recommendations. Don't overlook the importance of this step- top growers meticulously rely on information contained in soil tests. Shoot for 6.8 pH and 5-10% organic matter. Add manure, compost, leaves, and other organic matter to build soil structure and balance nutrient levels.

**Good weather (temperature & moisture).** The ideal temperature for a pumpkin is 85 degrees during the day, 65 degrees during the night. Pumpkins will freeze easily, protect them from early and late season frosts. Because of large leaf size, wind protection is also helpful to minimize structural damage. Pumpkins drink a lot of water; 1" of rain/irrigation/week is bare minimum.

## **Month-by-Month Grower's Timeline**

### **May**

The growing season begins the 1<sup>st</sup> week in May. Start seeds indoors. Seeds can be planted and kept in an oven with the oven light on to maintain ~85 degrees. Keep soil moist but not wet. Seeds can be soaked/filed to help with germination. Use a sterilized seed starting mix. Under these conditions, most seeds will germination within 36-48 hours.

Transplant seedlings into the garden after the danger of frost has passed. Pumpkins will NOT tolerate even a light frost. Pumpkins do best if allowed to spread out. 400 sq feet of garden space is optimal, however big pumpkins can be grown on smaller plots. Pumpkins do best in 100% sunlight. Choose an area where water drains well. Pumpkins do not like wet feet!

Mid-may, (depending on outdoor temperatures), plant the seedling into the prepared garden space and water thoroughly. You may want to cover the seedling during the night until nighttime temperatures have climbed into the 40's-50's. The pumpkin plant should receive at least 1" of water per week, throughout the growing season, from rain and/or irrigation.

### **June**

By June the plant should be vining in many directions. This is a very important time for the plant, as it is establishing a large root and leaf system necessary for large fruit growth. You can train the vines to go in any direction you like. Prevent the vines from crossing each other, as this helps to

minimize disease and maximizes plant area. Many growers bury vines with topsoil, as this encourages root growth. At each leaf, the vine will grow a root straight down. This greatly enhances the root system of the plant. This is essential, because more roots=more food for the pumpkin.

Vine pruning is an important strategy for growing big pumpkins. Removing excessive vine growth can help direct more energy into the growing pumpkin. Many vine pruning techniques exist, speak with an experienced grower for tips on effective vine management or visit [www.bigpumpkins.com](http://www.bigpumpkins.com). Control cucumber beetles and squash vine borers with appropriate insecticides.

## July

During the first week of July, female flowers appear on the vines. Pumpkins have two types of flowers, male and female. Males have long stems, and grow upright. Females have a baby pumpkin at their base and have short stems. Pumpkins are pollinated by bees, bugs, and people. Successful pollinations are necessary for the fruit to develop, and sometimes there are not enough bees around to do the job. Therefore, it's suggested that you become the "pollinator". This is done by pulling the pollen-loaded male flowers and rubbing them on a freshly opened female stigma (the structure in the middle of the flower). Female pumpkin flowers are only receptive for a couple hours in the morning they open (6-10am). So it's a good idea to keep an eye on what flowers are opening.

Try to pollinate as many flowers as you can. This provides a greater opportunity for more fruit to grow. Once the pumpkins reach volleyball size, you can then thin them out to 1-2 pumpkins per plant. Fewer fruit per plant means more energy for each pumpkin. Make sure to keep the fastest growing, best looking fruit.

## August

During the months of July and August, pumpkins pack on big weight. In order to maximize growth, maintain a consistent watering schedule. When the pumpkin reaches basketball size, align the fruit so that the stem makes a 90-degree angle to the vine. Move slowly, less than an inch per day until the right angle is achieved. This relieves stress and gives the fruit more room to grow. Prune vine tips by mid-August so that the plant forces energy into the pumpkin. Keep the patch weed-free, to the best of your ability. Cover pumpkins with a bed sheet to prevent sunburn. Mouse traps keep rodents from burrowing into your fruit. Control Powdery Mildew (white dust-like covering on leaves) with fungicide such as Daconil.

## September

By September, the nights will become cooler and pumpkin growth will slow considerably. Some growers cover the fruit at night with heavy blankets. This keeps moisture/frost from deteriorating the soft skin. The final step in the season is to harvest the pumpkin. Weigh-offs occur the end of September and beginning of October, contact your local club for information on exact dates. Finally, make sure to sit back and enjoy all the hard work you put into the season, and think about how you are going to beat your record next year.

## More Information:

St. Croix Grower's Association: [stcroixgrowers@frontiernet.net](mailto:stcroixgrowers@frontiernet.net)  
[www.stcroixgrowers.org](http://www.stcroixgrowers.org)

Join the giant pumpkin community on the web: [www.bigpumpkins.com](http://www.bigpumpkins.com)

