

# What's in Season from the Garden State

Seasonal Highlights from Cooperative Extension, a unit of Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

October 19, 2010



Top: A variety of ethnic winter squashes good for cooking; Middle and Bottom: Small hard shell or decorative pumpkins from small pumpkin variety trial at Rutgers research farm.

## October's Orange Orb

*Product Review: The Product Development Department at Nature, Inc. came up with a real winner with their fall line of vegetables: pumpkins and winter squashes. These diverse and eye-catching cucurbits come in a dazzling array of fall colors. Not only is their biodegradable packaging appealing to green consumers, but their high nutritional content is attractive to the health conscious as well. These fall vegetables (although technically a fruit) have got the market cornered on utility – they are both decorative and edible. While sporting good looks on the outside, tasty nutritious flesh on the inside, they have another clever packaging bonus within: highly nutritious and tasty seeds. Finally, these attractive, nutritious products contain no preservatives, yet have a shelf life of several months!*

*The winning product concept doesn't end with product development – the marketing department at Nature, Inc. has also produced a brilliant campaign to assure these items are top sellers. Developed to appeal to seasonal shoppers, these appear in markets for a limited time only. A devoted following of young and old consumers seek smooth rounds ones to use as a carver's canvass, and along with the more exotic looking ones, to adorn home exteriors. As any product marketing department knows, incorporating a product into a holiday theme assures popularity year after year, and these are no exception. Pumpkins are highlights of not one, but two autumn holidays: Halloween and Thanksgiving.*

*Kudos to Nature, Inc. for its superb product of pumpkins.*

It's that time of year that sends us in search of farm markets to take advantage of the fall harvest. Just as the tomato is the star of the summer venue, the pumpkin takes the spotlight in the fall. What used to be a large supply of round orange pumpkins has now diverged into an array of colors, sizes, shapes and textures, with growers providing a wider selection of pumpkins and squashes. What look like exotic pumpkins, according to Michelle Infante-Casella, Rutgers NJAES Agricultural Agent for Gloucester County, are actually ethnic winter squashes. While the decorative pumpkins are still edible, they tend to be more stringy and Infante-Casella recommends for cooking ones such as large neck squash (which looks like an overgrown butternut squash with a curved neck), Turk's turban and blue Hubbard squash, which have sweeter, denser flesh than traditional ornamental pumpkins. Another cooking favorite, especially for pies, is the tan colored cheese pumpkin, which is also a squash.

While farmers have their hands full selecting and growing so many varieties of pumpkins and squashes, they also have to contend with the ups and downs of the weather. A cooler and rainier year such as 2009 provided the much needed water for obtaining large size pumpkins, but

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New Jersey Department of  
Agriculture's Jersey Fresh &  
Seafood Availability Report

Apples	Leeks
Arugula	Lettuces
Baby Arugula &	Mint
Spinach	Parsley
Basil	Peppers
Beets	Pumpkins
Cabbage	Radishes
Cilantro	Spinach
Collards	Squash
Cranberries	Sweet Corn
Cucumbers	Sweet Potatoes
Dandelions	Swiss Chard
Dill	Tomatoes
Escarol/Endive	Turnips
Eggplant	White Potatoes
Kale	



was also conducive to creating disease conditions which can decrease yields and cause rotting fruit. A hot dry year like 2010 results in less disease, but can diminish fruit size in unirrigated fields. Rutgers NJAES researchers assist farmers by conducting pumpkin variety trials to help growers select pumpkin varieties that have the most disease resistance, yield and fruit quality grown under New Jersey conditions. One variety trial compared small varieties that are favored for pumpkin picking field trips for schools. Of the many varieties tested, Infante-Casella mentions some top variety performers were the 'Fall Splendor', 'Orange Smoothie', and 'Field Trip'. The trial recommendations are relayed to farmers via the annual New Jersey Vegetable Growers Recommendations manual. Recommended varieties take the trial and error factor away from farmers and ensure more successful crops.

Rutgers researchers also look at practices that improve growing conditions for pumpkins. Dr. Joseph Heckman, extension specialist in soil fertility, compared pumpkin plantings on soil mulched with municipal leaves vs. bare soil. Leaf mulching plots result in a win-win situation. Farmers can use a municipal waste product – leaves from shade trees - and can benefit by improved soil quality, less weed growth and cleaner pumpkins. An added benefit in the pick-your-own leaf mulched pumpkin patch is less mud on customers' shoes!

Dr. Heckman also conducted a soil fertility trial that helped suppress the disease powdery mildew in pumpkins. By liming with calcium silicate as opposed to the more common calcium carbonate, the nutrient silicon, a natural disease suppressant, is added to the soil. When the pumpkin fields are then rotated to another crop such as wheat, the wheat crop also shows sign of disease suppression.

In addition to the Rutgers NJAES trials assisting farmers in growing healthy crops with larger yields, growers can save expenses and lessen environmental impact by using less herbicides, fungicides and pesticides. This frees farmers up to focus on what's important: autumn festivals and pick your own pumpkins! If you want to get the best variety of pumpkins and winter squashes, head out to your local farm market. The chain stores that carry pumpkins may not have a large selection of exotic winter squashes, and the pumpkins there are most likely grown in Ohio or Pennsylvania, not New Jersey. While you're there, don't forget to pick up some apples, Jersey cider, cider donuts, corn stalks, hay bales and mums!



*Pumpkins from leaf mulch field trial. The leaf mulch grown pumpkins (left) were cleaner than pumpkins grown on bare ground (right).*

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