



Boutique Pumpkin Varieties

Don't think a plain orange pumpkin is your only option. Specialty pumpkin varieties turn heads on the farm with their rainbow of colors, textures and styles.

Courtesy Terroir Seeds LLC

The Galeux d'Eysines heirloom pumpkin variety turns heads with its pink skin and warty exterior.

We have hundreds of pumpkin varieties to choose from with new hybrids in development all the time. While many of them are big and orange and make the perfect jack-o'-lantern, specialty pumpkins steal the show. These are the beautiful boutique varieties that literally stand out in the field. Boutique pumpkins are easy to grow, eye-poppingly gorgeous and surprisingly useful in the kitchen.

The Pumpkin Family

Pumpkins are members of the Cucurbita family, along with squash, cucumbers and melons. The official line between pumpkins and squash is a fine one, and there's a lot of crossover and regionality in the usage of these common terms. Most experts consider pumpkins part of the winter squash category, along with Hubbard squash, Acorn squash and Butternut squash, all of which have hard skins and store well.

Pumpkins and other squash types fit into four primary species:

Cucurbita moschata

This species consists of many crookneck varieties, including Butternut squash and Cushaw squash. Members of this species are generally more resistant to pests and diseases, including squash bugs and vine borers. Cooking pumpkins tend to be in this group, as well, and it includes the most common varieties for canning.

Cucurbita pepo

This species includes most jack-o'-lantern pumpkin varieties; the miniature varieties; and most soft-skinned summer squash, including Scallopini squash, Patty Pan squash, zucchini and others. Gourds are also in this category.

Cucurbita maxima

This species consists of the biggest members of the family including Hubbard squash, Turban squash, Buttercup squash, and other large-fruited squash and pumpkins.

Cucurbita mixta

Members of this species are not as sweet and flavorful as the other groups and are often cooked with sweeteners. Many types are used as a source of edible seeds. They have good resistance to vine borers and drought. The most common C. mixta variety is the Cushaw squash, which you'll see with white skin (the Johnathan pumpkin), green striped, and orange or yellow striped.

Regardless of their official familial lines, boutique pumpkins have a one-up on jack-o'-lanterns, especially at farmers' markets. They're downright interesting, and for a customer who wants to stand out from the crowd, a display of these unique fruits will get them all the attention they can handle.

"These types of pumpkins draw crowds and give people something unique to take home," says Danny Neel, marketing specialist with the USDA and an advisor to the Virginia Pumpkin Growers' Association. "It's hard to know the demographics of pumpkin buyers, but we know it's a diverse group."

And, for now, these diverse customers can't buy specialty pumpkins at the big box store—they have to either grow them or rely on a small farmer who's willing to step out of the box.