

Pumpkin Primer
By Ora Emmerich
UCCE El Dorado County Master Food Preservers

Indigenous to North America, on October 31 the pumpkin will be found on almost every porch in town. Most people follow good practices for picking out a pumpkin. One looks for a pumpkin that is firm, not soft and squishy, and most look for a pumpkin that seems heavy for its size. Good start. Then, the confusion begins.

For some reason, people take this fat-free squash which is loaded with vitamins C and A and lots of yummy fiber and hollow out the middle and cut holes in the sides. Then, to further insult this delicious vegetable, folks set the poor pumpkin outside and stick a lighted candle in it.

Curious. Although there is no safe method for canning pureed pumpkin at home, the happy cook knows that pumpkins may be preserved in other ways. Fresh pumpkin puree may be frozen in freezer-safe containers. Leave ½ inch headspace and the main ingredient for a lovely pumpkin pie lies right at hand in the freezer.

To puree pumpkin, simply cut the pumpkin in half and scoop out the seeds and strings. Then, bake at 325° for about one hour or until soft. Scoop out the insides and mash. Alternative methods such as steaming or simmering may also be used.

All those pumpkin seeds make the tastiest snack. The National Center for Home Food Preservation recommends the following method for making pumpkin seeds at home: Remove the seeds from a pumpkin; wash and remove the stringy material. Drain and spread to dry. Sun-dry or use an electric dehydrator at 115-120°F for 1 to 2 hours or in an oven on a very low, warm temperature only, for 3 to 4 hours. Stir frequently to avoid scorching. Dried seeds should not be stored with any moisture left in them. Toss dried pumpkin seeds with oil and/or salt and roast in a preheated oven at 250°F for 10 to 15 minutes.

Takes too long? Then, try a pumpkin shake. The CDC suggests this recipe: blend 1 cup of pumpkin purée with 1 cup of nonfat milk, 1 banana, 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract and 2 teaspoons of honey. Add ice cubes if desired and blend again. Sprinkle with nutmeg.

Which pumpkins can be used for eating? Check the porch, there is probably one out there right now staring at someone. No tricks, most Halloween pumpkins make great pumpkin food treats. For questions about safe home food preservation, or to schedule a speaker for organizations or clubs on the topics of food safety or food preservation, call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506. For more information, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Food_Preservers/. Sign up to receive our Master Food Preservers E-Newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpnews/>.