

The Augusta Chronicle

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Giant pumpkins are incredible, not easy to grow in Augusta

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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I thought I would take a little break from talking about the exorbitant number of trees down from Helene and ease into something a little more upbeat.

Halloween is around the corner and pumpkins are the No. 1 squash associated with the annual October 31st ghoulish and goblin holiday. The big thing to do with pumpkins is to carve them into jack-o-lanterns with the remains being used for pumpkin-based dishes.

Pumpkins are a type of squash from the Cucurbita family. They are believed to have originated in Central America from seeds that date back 6,000 years. Native Americans used them as a staple of their diet for many years.

They are grown on six continents and Morton, Illinois is the proclaimed “Pumpkin Capital of the World.” With more than 100 varieties of pumpkins, you can almost find one for any situation from eating to carving to miniature and even into an annual contest for growing the largest pumpkin.

Growing giant pumpkins has become a big sport worldwide. Last October a landscape and horticulture teacher from Minnesota broke the world record for a pumpkin when he harvested a behemoth 2,749-pound specimen. That would be enough to make 687 pumpkin pies. The \$30,000 grand prize winner was grown in a pumpkin patch in his backyard that was watered as many as 12 times a day.

In the U.S., we regularly harvest pumpkins weighing in over a ton including some that are reaching now over 2,500 pounds. Looking at the record pumpkins from over the years on pumpkinpatchesandmore.org, it is interesting to see how exponentially larger these record harvests have become. In 1900 the largest pumpkin was 400 pounds. In 1990, 816 pounds. In

2012, a grower in Rhode Island finally broke the one-ton mark. And now, growers are 700 pounds above that.

So how do farmers get pumpkins to grow that big?

The first thing is they need room. The recommended space allotted to grow a giant is 30 feet by 30 feet. Then comes good soil with plenty of organic material and microbes. You can't just put an ordinary pumpkin seed in the ground and add plenty of water. You must use a seed whose genetic codes have traits that will allow a pumpkin to grow to the size close to a Volkswagen Beetle. Most of the time you can buy a seed from a reputable seed producer or find a giant pumpkin grower and ask if they don't mind sharing a couple from their arsenal. Giant pumpkin isn't just based on genetics, but a big balance of nature and nurture.

Once a vine is established, growers will pick the best of the emerging pumpkins and remove most of the rest. This leaves the vine the ability to focus on feeding only a few pumpkins. Having good healthy leaves on the vine is the fuel for growth. Sunlight is collected from the leaves into the process of photosynthesis, which is plant food. Plenty of nutrients in the soil including nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and a host of micronutrients also keep these beasts expanding especially during peak growing times where they can add 50 pounds per day.

Campbell Vaughn: Things to keep in mind as Augusta recovers from Hurricane Helene

Water is also critical for growing these giants, but too much water is not always better. If a pumpkin gets too much water, it can split, resulting in a very sad giant pumpkin grower. Occasionally a grower will leave a few extra fruits on the vine to help absorb excess water especially before a storm period.

All this talk about growing giant pumpkins might get folks in our area eager to try this hobby, but unfortunately our heat and humidity isn't ideal for growing this type of cucurbit. The best giant pumpkins we grow in Georgia have cooler night temperatures in northern parts of the state that are the best growing areas. And the biggest in the nation are usually where there is a lot more growing season daylight, areas like Wisconsin, Maine and New Hampshire. And it looks like Minnesota, too.

There are some really neat websites from contests all over the nation and world that celebrate growing giant pumpkins in what has become quite a phenomenon.

