

Preserving Pumpkins and Saving Squash

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

For the Evansville Courier Press, October 8, 2017

Popular autumn decorations include pumpkins, squash, and colorful gourds. Unfortunately, these decorative fruits often don't last too long before they begin to rot and get moldy. Fortunately, I'm here to give you some tips on how to prolong their ornamental appeal, and maybe even remain edible!

Pumpkins and winter squash are warm-season vegetables. They do not tolerate cold weather, and even a light frost can start them decaying almost immediately. Direct sunlight also hastens breakdown. Keep pumpkin piles in shady locations during the day. Protect them from frosts by either bringing them indoors, or covering them with straw until morning. Gourds are usually dry and hard when October rolls around, and are therefore not as badly damaged unless they get wet.

Carving pumpkins for Halloween is an American twist of old European customs. In the early 19th century, people in Ireland, Scotland and England would carve jack-o'-lanterns out of turnips, as a way to ward away spirits during Samhain (Halloween). Pumpkins and other types of squash originated in the Americas, and by the mid-1800s, were the popular choice for carving.

Anyone who has ever carved a pumpkin, though, knows that its lifespan is very short. Within a day of carving, they begin to look a little wilted. After a couple of days, molds and decay set in, and your lovely fall art begins to look (and smell) a bit rancid. There are a few things you can do to extend their useful life, according to my colleagues at the Alabama Extension Service.

First, choose a pumpkin without any visible rots, molds, or bruises. Gently wash the outside of the pumpkin with some cool, soapy water, and rinse. Carve it as usual. Soak the carved pumpkin in a weak bleach solution (one teaspoon of household bleach to 1 gallon of water) for 8 hours. Each day after the initial soak, spray it with the mild bleach solution. The soaking and spraying is intended to keep the pumpkin flesh hydrated, while the bleach is acting as an antimicrobial to reduce mold growth. With this remedy, the jack-o-lantern has been known to last up to 10 days with minimal mold growth and decay.

It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: do not eat or cook with the pumpkin flesh that has been in contact with the bleach. Use inexpensive battery-operated tea lights to light your jack-o-lantern, rather than candles, for safety and longevity.

Pumpkins or squash are often painted to reduce the mess and preserve them for longer periods. My family always used water-color paints; that way, after Halloween, the paint could be easily washed off and the squash eaten. Some of the more permanent paints and craft items may make the squash unsafe to eat.

For more information on keeping your holiday ghoulish but safe, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.