

As
Seen In

Country Folks GROWER

Pumpkin patchwork

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by Sally Colby

The first year they grew pumpkins, Chris and Larry Swartz planted two varieties of the ubiquitous orange harbingers of autumn on one acre. They worked the field by hand with a rototiller, applied spray with a backpack sprayer and borrowed a truck to haul the pumpkins to market. Today, ten years later, Swartz's Pumpkin Patch grows pumpkins on five acres with the help of a cover crop, a planter, an airblast sprayer and a truck for hauling. Along with pumpkins, the Swartz family grows other cucurbits as well as pick-your-own strawberries and raspberries in Biglerville, PA, in the heart of the state's fruit belt.

Pumpkin growers can concentrate on a variety of aesthetic qualities including shape, color and size. The Swartzs found that it's worthwhile to grow pumpkins with heavy stems, and began growing thick-stemmed varieties several years ago. "A lot of people don't want to 'bear hug' a pumpkin," Chris explained. "They want something nice to hold. Stems, or handles, add a lot of character to a pumpkin. Some people turn the pumpkin on its side, use the stem as a nose and decorate it with a face." Chris added that the seed for the stem pumpkins is significantly more expensive than other varieties, but heavy stemmed-pumpkins demand a higher price.

Anyone who has planted pumpkins knows that growing them is more than a matter of tossing seeds in a field. Chris and Larry begin each season by reviewing that year's records and studying the results of variety trials. They attend winter meetings and view presentations that provide information about varieties. Chris says that pumpkin genetics have changed a lot over the past five years, with more varieties resistant to powdery mildew. Powdery mildew tolerance is a feature many growers insist upon, but the Swartzs would rather select varieties that sell well. "We've grown as many as eight varieties, but now we concentrate on four face pumpkin varieties," said Chris. "We try to have a higher quality product and not just quantity. We like to have an average weight of 6 to 8 pounds, but started growing pumpkins that are 30 pounds and up because some of those aren't going to make 30 pounds. We look at the handle to make sure that it will be good quality and try to get some of the different specialty pumpkins. We have a series of pumpkins that we like and stick with, but if something new comes out, we'll try it."

The varieties they have been pleased with include Fairy Tale, a deep orange-brown pumpkin with a slightly squat shape and deep lobes; Jarrahdale, a striking slate grey/blue variety from Australia; Long Island Cheese, a nicely shaped squat pumpkin the color of a neck pumpkin; and Cotton Candy, a white variety with a thick stem and typical pumpkin shape. Sharing the pumpkin field are neck pumpkins and a variety of gourds.

Field preparation begins the fall prior



Getting this large pumpkin out of the field will take two sets of hands! Caleb Swartz and his mom Chris work together in the pumpkin patch, cutting pumpkins, gourds and squash for market.

Photos by Sally Colby



Labor Day, and then they only want a few to get started. We started planting them later and the plants look really nice. The leaves shade the pumpkins and it just works better."

Chris noted that varieties such as Jarrahdale and Fairy Tale take longer to ripen, so they are planted the third week in May. Larry uses a two-row corn planter, adjusted so that seeds are deposited as far apart as possible. When the vines begin to run in early July, the first nitrogen application goes on. The Swartzs aim for no more than 50 to 60 pounds total nitrogen applied during the entire season.

Scouting for squash bugs and other pests begins when the plants start to flower. Fungicide spraying begins in mid to late July and continues through at least early to mid September. Chris says that if the weather is especially moist, they'll spray more often. Pollination was good this year, aided by hives near the fields.

Signals of the autumn season such as the start of school, cooler weather and football games initiate interest in pumpkins, so harvest begins the week after Labor Day. Chris and Larry cut the stems with sharp shears, leaving a generous stem and whenever possible, a curlicue. "I try to leave a curlicue whenever I can," said Chris. "It adds character."

Harvested pumpkins are placed along the ends of rows for pick up. How the pumpkins will be hauled, where they're going and how long the pumpkins will sit in bins determines the type and size of bins. "Some of the local people we haul to put the pumpkins in wooden apple bins, which can breathe," said Chris. "If damp pumpkins are placed in cardboard bins, moisture can accumulate and cause rotten spots."

The Swartzs sell by the pound, using local scales to weigh truckloads of pumpkins.

Because their location isn't practical for a pick-your-own operation, the Swartzs sell locally to various wholesale markets including a local orchard, a dairy farm and several roadside markets. For several years, they set up in a parking field of the National Apple Harvest Festival and did well adjacent to another vendor selling apples and cider.

Chris says that the biggest challenge in growing pumpkins is dry weather. If summer moisture is adequate, it's no problem to get huge pumpkins, but dry years often mean small fruits. "We're looking into some kind of irrigation for next year," said Chris. "The easiest is overhead irrigation with a small traveler, but overhead irrigation is challenging because you're setting up conditions for more mildew. Drip tape is best but it will take a lot of it."

A nearby creek would be a reliable source of irrigation water. Chris said that with the number of fencerows on the farm, they expected more animal damage, but deer damage hasn't been as bad as they anticipated.

As bright autumn days and cooler