

THE LIFE OF A PUMPKIN - update #2

Winter is still here, but spring is coming. If you read our first update, you know we've been looking at seed catalogs to decide what kind pumpkin to plant. We hope you have, too. Now it's time to make plans for your garden by picking a garden spot and choosing the kind of plants (especially pumpkins!) you want to grow. If you can't plant your own pumpkin, you can still follow *The Life of a Pumpkin* and learn right along with us.

Finding a garden spot for your pumpkin

To pick a garden spot, think about how much space you have, how much sunlight shines on that area, how much and what kind of **soil** (planting material or dirt) is available, and how much time you have to spend on a garden. You will also need access to water. Plants need plenty of that, and unless you have a garden with an **irrigation** (watering) system, an outdoor faucet and garden hose will make it easier to give your plants a frequent drink. You can always carry a watering can or bucket to your garden spot if there is no faucet nearby.

If you don't have much space, then grow your pumpkins in a container garden of colorful pots in a sunny corner of your deck or patio. If you have more room for growing, consider a bigger garden project with raised beds or neat planting rows. The possibilities are endless. Be creative!



Container garden



Raised bed garden



Row garden

Some pumpkin plants produce very long vines – 20 feet or more! – that can easily take over a small garden. If you have room, let the vines stretch out as much as they need to. If you will be growing in a raised garden bed, plant the seeds near the edge of the bed so you can train the vine to drape over the edge and leave room for other plants in the bed. When the seedlings are small, you can easily lead the vines to where you want them to grow. Once the pumpkin plant starts to make flowers, you'll need to leave them alone.



Large pumpkin variety with long vines



Smaller pumpkin variety with short vines



Once you've picked your garden spot, it's time to narrow down your choices of pumpkin varieties.

Choosing a pumpkin to grow

If you do have lots of space for those pumpkin vines to spread, choose a larger variety, such as Big Max or Big Moose. If you want to grow a really BIG pumpkin, then try the Atlantic Giant. It's the largest pumpkin variety in the world, with vines that can grow 90 feet long. An Atlantic Giant weighing 2,350 pounds won the Safeway World Championship Pumpkin Weigh-Off contest in 2020!

If you don't have much space, select a smaller pumpkin variety like Munchkin or Trickster. Plant a couple of seeds in a pot or planter, and use a **trellis** to direct the pumpkin vines upward. A trellis is a wooden or metal structure that supports sprawling plants and climbing vines.



Giant pumpkin



Tiny pumpkin

Some pumpkin varieties are **edible**, meaning they are good to eat. These are used to make pies and other tasty treats. Some pumpkins are **ornamentals**, grown for the way they look and aren't meant to be eaten. Pie or sugar pumpkin varieties, like Small Sugar or Winter Luxury, grow on smaller plants with shorter vines. These are good for both eating and carving and weigh only 4-6 pounds.

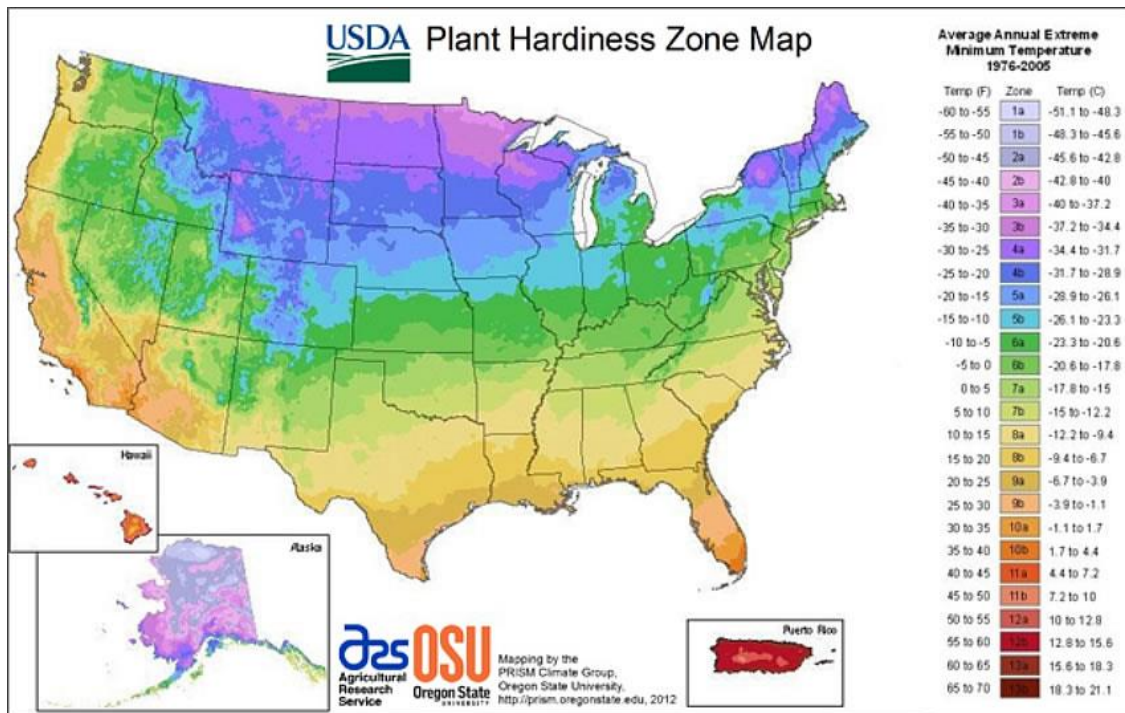
Plant hardiness

When we talk about a plant's **hardiness**, we're talking about how well can it withstand heat, cold, moisture or dryness, and other factors. It's important to know if the varieties you select can survive freezing temperatures (below 32°F) or at least produce mature pumpkins to harvest before freezing temperatures arrive.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture created a Hardiness Zone Map for the country, dividing it into 11 separate planting zones. Each zone represents a 10-degree range, with sub-classifications "a" and "b" having a 5-degree range. Each zone is 10°F warmer (in an average winter) than the zone next to it. The Reno/Sparks area is in plant hardiness zone 7b, with an average annual **minimum** (lowest) temperature between 5°-10°F.

Seed catalogs, and sometimes seed packets, include hardiness zone information in their descriptions so that gardeners can choose varieties that will do best in their local area. Also, some plants need warm temperatures for their seeds to sprout, and some need very warm temperatures in order to set fruit. These are all important things to consider when selecting varieties for your garden.





2012 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, courtesy USDA Agricultural Research Service

Find the original map at <http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/Default.aspx>

Anatomy of a seed packet

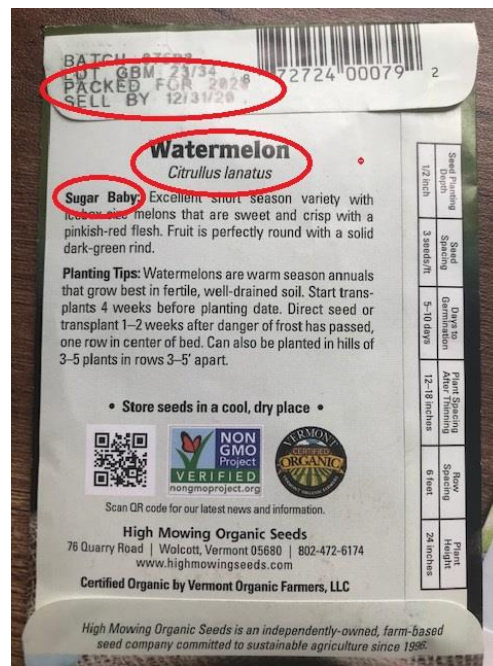
A seed packet protect the seeds inside and provides information about the plants those seeds will produce. The packet lists the name of the seed company and the kind of seed it contains. There is also usually a photo or drawing of what that plant looks like when fully grown.

For our example, we used a watermelon seed packet from 2020 because we haven't ordered our pumpkin seeds for 2021 yet. The name of the plant (watermelon) and the plant variety (Sugar Baby) are printed on the front of the pack along with photo of a Sugar Baby watermelon.

Underneath the name and variety, it says our seeds are **open-pollinated**, meaning the seeds were **pollinated** (that's how plants reproduce) by natural events such as wind or insects moving pollen from one plant to the next. These seeds are **organic** (from plants raised under strict rules that don't allow certain chemicals to be used) and **non-GMO**. GMO stands for "genetically modified organism". Non-GMO means these seeds are from plants whose basic genetic structure hasn't been modified or changed by scientists.

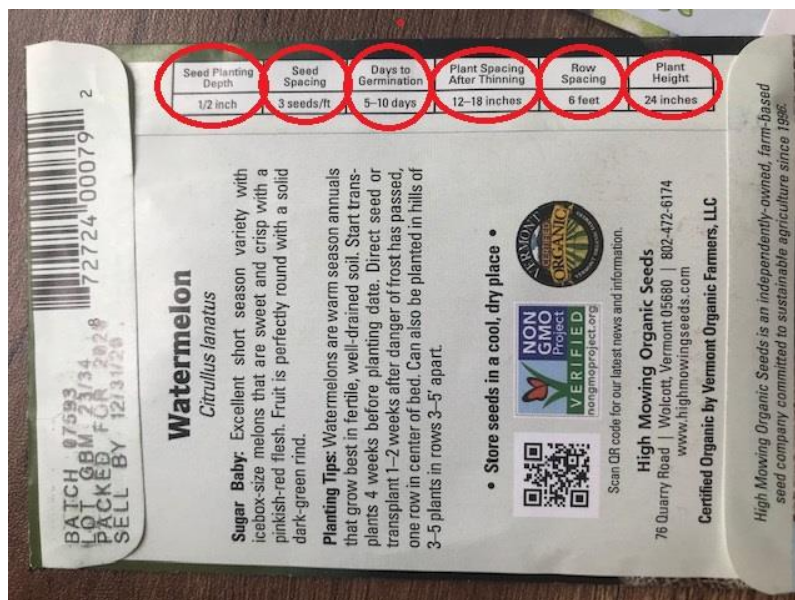
Look for a "packed for", or "sell by", date somewhere on the packet. Our packet has this information printed on the back. Use the freshest seeds available to improve your chances of a good harvest. The scientific name of the watermelon family (*Citrullus lanatus*) is also printed here.





Our seed packet includes additional details. It lists "days to maturity" (how long until the plant is fully grown) and how many seeds are in the packet. There's also a description of the Sugar Baby variety and planting tips. Specific planting information is printed along the side edge of the packet:

- **seed planting depth** – how far down into the soil you should plant the seed
- **seed spacing** - how far apart to plant the seeds
- **days to germination** - how long it takes for the seed to sprout
- **plant spacing after thinning** - how far apart seedlings should be after you thin, or pull out, the extras (thinning helps grow larger, healthier plants that don't have to compete with too-close neighbors)
- **row spacing** - how far apart your rows should be, in either a row garden or in raised beds
- **plant height** - how tall the mature plant will be



Now that we have walked you through some of the details found on a typical seed packet, it's time for you to do some sleuthing of your own. Not all seed packets have all of the information we're looking for in this scavenger hunt. Do your best and see what kind of interesting details you can find!

ACTIVITY: Seed packet scavenger hunt

Materials

- Seed packet (if you don't have one on hand, you can find images of several different packets at this link: <https://mylittlegreengarden.com/how-to-read-a-seed-packet-for-beginners/>)
- Pencil, marker, or crayon

Look over our seed packet examples above, then compare your seed packet (or one of the images found on at the link shown above) to our photos. See how many questions you can answer based on the information you find printed on the packets:

1. What is the name of the plant that your seeds will grow? _____
2. How many seeds are in your packet? _____
3. What year were your seeds packaged for? _____
4. How deep should you plant your seeds? _____
5. How many days will it take for your seeds to sprout? _____
6. How many days until your plant is fully grown and ready to harvest? _____

BONUS: What is the scientific name of the plant family listed on your packet?

Now you know how to read a seed packet!

Many local plant nurseries and hardware stores sell seeds and have them in stores right now, or you can buy them online. We shared a sample list of seed sources in update #1. Once you select your variety, buy your seeds. Companies may sell out of certain varieties very fast.

Next time: We'll make a planting plan for our garden spot and find out when it's safe to plant vegetables here in the Reno area. Stay tuned for that important information!

About *The Life of a Pumpkin*: We will be documenting the life of a pumpkin during the 2021 growing season, from selecting and planting a seed all the way through harvesting a ripe pumpkin in the fall. It all depends on the weather and other natural conditions, of course! You can grow your very own pumpkin, too, or just follow along as we do all the work. 😊 Look for lots more information in the days ahead as we show you how to do it. Please join us on this exciting and educational STEAM adventure!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Books available from the Washoe County Library System

[*Garden Fun!: Indoors & Out, In Pots & Small Spots*](#) by Vicky Condon



[Gardening with Emma : Grow and Have Fun : A Kid-to-Kid Guide](#) by Emma Biggs with help from her dad, Steven Biggs

[Green Gardening and Composting](#) by Molly Aloian

[Patio Gardens](#) by Lori Kinstad Pupeza

[Planting the Seed : A Guide to Gardening](#) by Suzanne Winckler

[Roots, Shoots, Buckets & Boots : Gardening Together with Children](#) by Sharon Lovejoy

Videos

Garden Answer, US Plant Zones: Explained, Garden Answer <https://youtu.be/O6AM0pNiUOs>

SciShow Kids, Grow Your Own Plants! <https://youtu.be/Lly75dEbXE8>

Websites

Gardener's Supply Company, How to Use the Hardiness Zone Map
<https://www.gardeners.com/how-to/new-hardiness-map/7887.html>

PBS Kids for Parents, Gardening with Kids: How It Affects Your Child's Brain, Body and Soul
<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/gardening-with-kids-how-it-affects-your-childs-brain-body-and-soul>

