

Geography In The News™



Neal Lineback
and Mandy Lineback Gritzner

THE GREAT AMERICAN PUMPKIN

It's harvest time and competitive pumpkin weigh-offs are happening around the country. While some growers are in it for fun, others are trying to beat the amazing 1,810-pound (821-kg) giant, the 2010 record for the world's biggest pumpkin.

A pumpkin is a gourd-like squash with a leathery shell when mature. The shell is typically thick, orange or yellow in color, but may also be dark green, pale green, orange-yellow, white, red or gray. The normally ribbed shell encases the pumpkin's seeds and pulp. Pumpkin shapes differ between varieties and may be round to oblong. Pumpkins can range in size from less than 1 pound (0.45 kg) to more than 1,000 pounds (450 kg), though most weigh 9-18 pounds (4-8 kg).

Pumpkins are in the genus *Cucurbita* and the family *Cucurbitaceae*, which also includes gourds, cucumbers and watermelons. Most pumpkins used at Halloween for Jack-o-lanterns are the bright orange and uniformly shaped *Cucurbita pepo*. Many of the largest pumpkins, including the popular "Boston Marrow" and "Mammoth," are *Cucurbita maxima*. Small cooking pumpkins are normally *Cucurbita moschata*.

Pumpkins may have originated in South America, perhaps around Buenos Aires, according to the *Smithsonian* (Oct.

2011). Pumpkin seeds found in Mexico and dated between 7000 and 5500 BC are the oldest known in the world.

American Indians had been using pumpkins as a staple in their diets and weaving their dried shells into mats long before Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492. Soon after European settlers arrived in the colonies, they also added pumpkin to their diets. In fact, pumpkin may have been served at a harvest feast between the Pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians in 1621 on which our Thanksgiving holiday is based. The settlers brought pumpkin seeds back to Europe and the pumpkin rose to popularity there. Early settlers used pumpkin in stews, soups and desserts, much as it is used today.

Pumpkins are grown around the world for many purposes including commercial food, ornamental sales and agricultural use, such as feed for animals. They can be grown on every continent but Antarctica. The world's top producers of pumpkins include China, India, Ukraine, the United

Agriculture 2010 Vegetable Summary, pumpkins harvested from 48,500 acres (19,627 hectares) were valued at \$116.5 million. That amounts to 1.1 billion pounds (499 million kg) of pumpkins.

The top pumpkin producing state is Illinois with 427 million pounds (194 million kg). In fact, many of the pumpkins grown in the United States are raised within a 90-mile (145-km) radius of Peoria, Ill. The town of Morton, Ill., located near Peoria, is the home to a Libby's pumpkin processing plant. Libby's is owned by the Nestlé Food Company, which annually cans more than 85 percent of the world's processed pumpkin.

Following Illinois in pumpkin production are California, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

Competitive pumpkin growing is serious business, particularly in the United States, and the growers may spend thousands of dollars a year trying to get the "Big One." The hobby's elite growers search out the best seeds from other big pumpkins. They spend hundreds of dollars on laboratory analyses of soil and plant tissues, which allows them to add exactly what a pumpkin needs, like nitrogen or calcium. Enthusiasts also speed photosynthesis by spraying their plants' leaves with carbon dioxide.

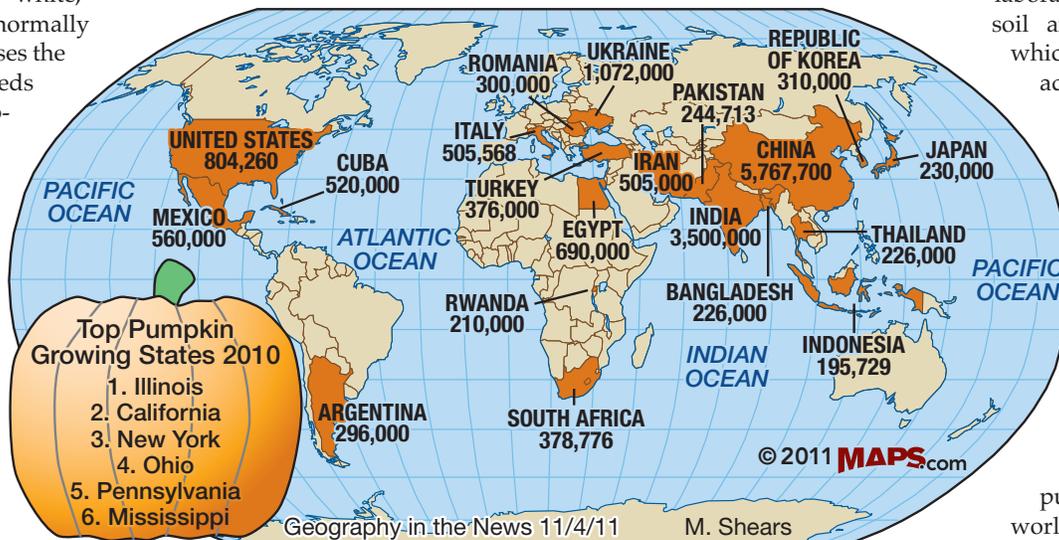
A 493.5 pound (223 kg) pumpkin was the world's largest in 1981, but science and technology have greatly expanded the potential for a 2,000 pound (907 kg) pumpkin by 2018. World champions aren't good cooking pumpkins, however. It's a shame, as only the small cooking pumpkins are used to make those delicious Thanksgiving

pies.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. November 4, 2011. #1118.

Co-authors are Neal Lineback, Appalachian State University Professor Emeritus of Geography, and Geographer Mandy Lineback Gritzner. University News Director Jane Nicholson serves as technical editor.

Top Twenty Pumpkin Growing Countries, 2005



■ Pumpkin farming country (All numbers are metric tons)

Sources: <http://www.fao.org/es/ess/top/commodity.html?lang=en&item=394&year=2005>
<http://usda01.library.cornell.edu/usda/current/VegeSumm/VegeSumm-01-27-2011.pdf>

Sources: http://www.agmrc.org/commodities_products/vegetables/pumpkins.cfm; http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/06/garden/the-race-to-grow-the-one-ton-pumpkin.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=pumpkin&st=cse; and Borrell, Brendan, *The Great Pumpkin*, Smithsonian, Oct. 2011.

States, Egypt and Mexico.

In the United States, the market for pumpkins is considered limited and seasonal. Most pumpkins are grown for processing, such as in canned pie filling. A smaller percentage is grown for ornamental sales, like gourds and Jack o'lanterns.

According to the U.S. Department of