



TOP LEFT Jacky tackles an 'Autumn Crown' pumpkin. BELOW LEFT Michelin- star chef Raymond Blanc proudly recommends his favourite pumpkin, 'Musquée de Provence'. RIGHT Pumpkin 'Cinderella' grows on vines, some 5-6m in length, with large-leaved foliage that is best removed in September, allowing autumn sun to help ripen the fruits. OPPOSITE PAGE Pumpkins are left to cure in the protection of the polytunnels at Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons, before they are sampled by Raymond and his team.



# Pumpkins

More than just fun-shaped Halloween lanterns, these sumptuously colourful fruits are a delicious ingredient for autumnal recipes

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

Pumpkins are a must this month. They are a colourful addition to the larder at this time of year, and impart an earthy flavour in simple dishes like soup, risotto and ravioli. Yet thanks to their abundance around Halloween and the resulting mass of pumpkin flesh (the innards of all those ghoulish lanterns) that must be used up in a seemingly never-ending array of dishes, I am aware that for some people they may be a little out of favour. I confess I decided against sowing seeds earlier this year. However, visiting Raymond Blanc at the organic kitchen garden at Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire, my enthusiasm for them has been revived. I am a born-again pumpkin grower and cook.

Raymond explains that for him it's 'all about the variety. A good variety in poor soil and bad weather will still be 10 times better than a poor variety in good earth with sunshine'. Having trialled more than 40 varieties, his must-have pumpkin is 'Musquee de Provence', a cheese-wheel-shaped, polished cinnamon-coloured fruit with voluptuous tactile ribs. It's delicious when cooked and can be eaten fresh in wedges or sliced sushi-thin.

Instinctively Raymond taps the fruit to 'hear' if it is ripe, before cutting out a perfect sunset-orange segment, and after looking for the desired tell-tale 'pearls' of glucose that burst out of perfectly ripened sweet pumpkins, he dices it, offering it up for tasting. 'You must always taste this ingredient raw,' he explains. 'All my students and chefs do this'. ▶



## Expert Advice

### TOP TIPS ON GROWING PUMPKINS FROM JO CAMPBELL, GARDENER AT LE MANOIR AUX QUAT'SAISONS ORGANIC GARDEN

- **Taste different varieties now** and buy seed for the following year - we always choose organic seed.
- **Protect from mice** - we use a friendly mouse cage.
- **Sow seed at the end of April** in a heated greenhouse, two seeds per pot, planted vertically so that water slides off, preventing rot. Do not overwater, as seed is susceptible to damping off.
- **Sow seeds indoors to help encourage good strong plants.** When they have at least two pairs of leaves, move pots into a cold frame to harden off for seven to 10 days.
- **Pierce matting with a large cut cross**, 1-1.5m apart according to variety, and place in a cane marker so you know where the roots are, for watering later on - pumpkins naturally wander off.
- **If the variety is trailing**, you can erect a stout wigwam of canes, silver birch or chestnut sticks (and I do mean stout. You could sit on Jo's - remember they may be supporting a real heavyweight). This saves space in the garden; it helps guard against pests and diseases, and keeps fruit clean and well ventilated.
- **Plant in pre-prepared ground.** Use lots of moisture-retentive organic matter (Jo makes her own compost) pegged down under sheets of black permeable matting that keeps down weeds, locks moisture in and helps warm up the earth before planting out.
- **Water plants when dry.** Feeding shouldn't be necessary - if the ground has been properly prepared, they should be able to obtain all required nutrients from the soil.
- **Check foliage for signs of black fly**, pinching off or rubbing away if they appear. Let foliage die back to expose the fruits for ripening, and leave in the ground, attached to the plant, for as long as possible.
- **Traditionally, fruits are brought in before the frosts**, but Raymond has asked his team to try leaving them out. They don't look particularly fragile. Alternatively, bring fruits in, keeping them on a good length of stem - this helps cure the skin. Make sure they are well ventilated, at about 10°C, and check regularly for damage. Fruits will last a good one or two months. Cook when required.

**RIGHT** Raymond Blanc explains that the texture of Jacky's soup is too grainy - it needs to be liquidised further to release all the flavour and create a texture that's as smooth as silk. **BELOW** Pumpkins left to ripen on straw.

We try 'Cinderella', 'Ghost Rider' and a small sugar pumpkin, which, while less intense, is streets ahead of your typical lantern pumpkin. I offer Raymond a slice of a new variety from Tozer seeds, 'Autumn Crown', a delicious buttery cross between a butternut squash and a pumpkin. It looks a lot like a smaller, paler 'Musquée de Provence', with tasty, rich, sweet, mango-red flesh.

In a plucky twist to the usual format of this series, I had decided to use 'Autumn Crown' to make one of Raymond's own soup recipes, with the intention of bringing it to the shoot for him to taste. Brave or foolish? This small, succulent pumpkin may be the answer for smaller gardens, and, personally, I prefer a fruit I can use up in one go. The recipe itself was straightforward, and the results were a moorish, rich, creamy, buttery, pumpkiny soup. Raymond's verdict, however, is a little less effusive: 'It's tasty but grainy, it should be smooth and luxurious like silk. You must liquidise it until you have the silky texture. As it breaks down, you unleash all the flavour held in tiny capsules.' Raymond then tucks a couple of pumpkins under his arms and goes off to the kitchens to try them out.

A final word of caution when it comes to growing your own pumpkins: they do need space. They are a trailing vine, so have a tendency to wander off, and can inflate to gigantic proportions. Last year, a record-breaking 'Atlantic Giant' pumpkin weighed in at a whopping 1,600lbs (which is heavier than a Fiat 500!), smashing British and European records. You have been warned!



## Events & contacts

- **Raymond Blanc Cookery School** A selection of courses, including 'Garden to Plate'. Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons, Great Milton, Oxfordshire OX44 7PD. Tel: +44 (0)1844 278881. [www.manoir.com](http://www.manoir.com)
- **Pumpkin Days** The Lost Gardens of Heligan, Pentewan, St Austell, Cornwall PL26 6EN. Enjoy the Harvest Festival display, with more than 15 varieties of pumpkin on show, from Friday 21 to Sunday 30 October. Tel: +44 (0)1726 845100. [www.heligan.com](http://www.heligan.com)

- **Organic seed** Try Tucker's Seeds, Devon - Tel: +44 (0)1364 652233. [www.tuckers-seeds.com](http://www.tuckers-seeds.com); Tamar Organic, Cornwall - Tel: + 44 (0)1579 371087. [www.tamarorganics.co.uk](http://www.tamarorganics.co.uk); and The Real Seed Company, Pembrokeshire - Tel: + 44 (0)1239 821107. [www.realseed.co.uk](http://www.realseed.co.uk)
- **A new variety - 'Autumn Crown'** A cross between a butternut squash and pumpkin. Buy seeds from: [www.tozerseedsdirect.com](http://www.tozerseedsdirect.com), [www.suttons.co.uk](http://www.suttons.co.uk) and [www.thompson-morgan.com](http://www.thompson-morgan.com)

## Recipe 1 Ironbark pumpkin soup

### For 4 people:

- 400g ripe pumpkin flesh, outer skin removed and diced - *You can substitute Ironbark with any variety of pumpkin or a butternut squash: I used 'Autumn Crown'*
- 200g finely chopped onions
- 40g unsalted butter
- 8g sea salt
- 1/2g freshly ground white pepper
- 6g caster sugar
- 600ml organic whole milk
- Crème fraîche (optional)

- **On a medium heat**, soften onions in the butter for five minutes without colouring.
- **Add pieces of diced pumpkin** and soften to bring out the buttery flavour, for six to eight minutes, stirring occasionally.
- **Add the milk** and bring to simmer for 10 minutes (any longer and it may separate).
- **Liquidise** the soup until it reaches a smooth, velvety consistency.

- **Season with salt**, pepper and sugar if needed (this is a good idea for fruit that is slightly less ripe).
- **Serve with a touch** of crème fraîche if desired.

Variations to this recipe: Add 2 tablespoons of two-second boiled kirsch; or croutons topped with gruyere; or toasted pumpkin seeds; or hazelnuts. Chopped chives add colour and texture.



## Recipe 2 Pumpkin ravioli

### For 4 people. For the filling:

- 30g unsalted butter
- 700g butternut squash peeled, deseeded, diced into 2cm pieces
- 30g finely grated parmesan
- Salt and fresh ground black pepper
- 2 tbsps crushed amaretti biscuits

### For the pasta:

- You will need a pasta machine
- 100g pasta flour (preferably 'Type 00') and 1 egg
- **To make the filling:** Melt butter in a sauté pan, add squash and season. Keep the lid on and cook for 15 mins on a medium heat. Crush to a coarse purée and cook for five more minutes, but don't brown. Add parmesan and 2 tbsps of amaretti biscuits. Set aside.
- **To make the pasta:** Mix the egg into the flour and knead into a smooth ball. Wrap in cling film. Rest in fridge for one hour. Divide into three balls, and flatten each before rolling out with the machine. Start with the thickest setting, folding each sheet on itself and thinning until you reach setting number six.
- **To make the ravioli:** Place filling at regular intervals on pasta, lay a second sheet over and press to seal. Cut individual parcels.
- **To cook:** add to salted boiling water for two minutes, drain. Heat 30g butter with 2 tbsps water. Add the pasta and cook for one minute. Season and serve with fresh sage.

