

Putzing with Pumpkins



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After all these years of planting I'm finally growing pumpkins for the first time. There've been pumpkins planted in my garden in the past, but it was done by squirrels. They chewed up the fall pumpkin display and buried some of the seeds, and the pumpkins sprouted as volunteers the following spring. I got a few pumpkins out of it with no effort on my part. This year it's different. I guess the story begins about five years ago when I was walking down Michigan Avenue in Chicago one fine fall day. The city had huge planters on the sidewalk, and they always looked wonderful. On that particular day the autumnal display included pumpkins. Not huge, maybe 150 pounds or so. But some hooligans had been busy, and smashed some of the pumpkins onto the sidewalk. I scooped up some of the seeds and stuffed them in my souvenir cup from the Billy Goat Tavern, and put them in my refrigerator when I got home. This year I finally remembered the seeds at the right time, and planted up a bunch. I'd say 80% germinated, so I gave some plants to friends and planted the rest in my garden on June 13th.



Planting day June 13



July 25, 6 weeks after planting

Now the plants are well established, maybe ten feet wide. Like all cucurbits (plants in the squash, pumpkin, gourd, cucumber, and melon families, as well as other plants that aren't often cultivated), the huge flowers require pollinators. This is usually done by different kinds of insects, but sometimes the insects are in short supply. When the plants begin to flower, most of the early flowers are male. But if you observe the plants carefully, you'll soon see female flowers. I check them first thing in the morning, watching for insects that have already discovered the flowers. They are good at it. That's their job, after all. But if there's a shortage of insects, you can hand pollinate. (If you're a bit prudish, you can skip the next couple of sentences about sex in the garden. lol)

To assist in the pollination process, simply pick a fresh male flower, and strip it of its rich golden petals. The anthers remain, and you simply dab the pollen laden anthers onto the stigma of a female flower, as thoroughly as possible. You can do this with several male flowers if you feel frisky, but one is usually enough. The next day you'll see the spent female flower, withering. Directly behind it, you'll see the fertilized ovary, the future pumpkin. It'll be about the size of a ping pong ball, pale yellow in color. If the fertilization didn't take, it'll dry up. If pollination was successful, it'll immediately start to develop, and you'll see it grow in size every day.



**Female flower stigma,
with pollinator**



**Male flower with pollinator
on anthers**

Every year around Halloween we see stories in the news about very large pumpkins. The record for Wisconsin is 2,282 pounds. That would be fun to see. Most pumpkins begin showing female flowers around mid June. Many are quite a bit later. But let's say you had a successful pollination in mid-June, and you harvested that pumpkin in mid-October. That's about 120 days of growing. For that record pumpkin, given those dates, it would have to gain an average of nineteen pounds per day for the entire 120 day period! That requires lots of water. I've heard that growers of these monster pumpkins have a constant drip of water going. I've even heard of some growers injecting the pumpkin stems with milk. I'm sure there are plenty of tricks, especially regarding fertilizer. I'm not doing anything special, other than regular watering and fertilizing. This could be a fun project for kids, but my four year old granddaughter didn't seem too impressed with the ping pong sized pumpkin I showed her a few days ago. No doubt as it grows it'll grab her attention.



Female flower



Male flower

Hand pollinating isn't necessary for most plants. After all, they've all managed to reproduce in their native regions long before we humans started to grow them in our gardens. But it's kind of fun, and it's a great way to get kids involved in the garden. I mentioned earlier that pumpkins are in the family of plants known as cucurbits, a family that includes cucumbers and squash. All of these plants can be hand pollinated if you want to get intensely involved in the garden. I like it because it forces you to get intimately involved with the plants, and it helps you understand them. It also draws you into the entire natural world, and that's a good thing.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!

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