

Pumpkins from another planet? No, Wisconsin

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Glen Martin, the president of Wisconsin Giant Pumpkin Growers, and his wife, Margaret, of Combined Locks, Wisconsin, walk down the line of giant pumpkins and squash in their front yard, Oct. 5, 2014. The largest of the pumpkins weighs 1,719 pounds and the largest of the giant squash weighs 1,103 pounds. Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/MCT

COMBINED LOCKS, Wis. — Like many of their neighbors on this quiet street, Glen and Margaret Martin have put out pumpkins to decorate their front yard this October.

But the Martins' pumpkins are so humongous, they attract gawkers — people who come just to stare. These pumpkins are so big, they look like they are from another planet.

The Martins' pumpkins weigh more than 1,700 pounds each. Even so, they are not the biggest pumpkins grown in Wisconsin this year. Glen Martin would know. He is president of Wisconsin Giant Pumpkin Growers, a group of gardeners who like their pumpkins super-sized.

"It's In Our Blood"

Wisconsin is a major player in this field. It ranks fifth in giant-pumpkin winners, according to the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth, which sets rules for contests.

“It’s in our blood here, that comes from our dairy farming background in Wisconsin,” Glen Martin said. “It’s like taking care of a calf — you have to take care of it every day.”

Wisconsin Giant Pumpkin Growers started 20 years ago with 14 growers. The group now has 120 members and meets regularly to discuss competitions and schedule pumpkin-growing seminars.

“As with many things in Wisconsin, it started in a bar,” Martin said. “A bunch of guys standing around saying, ‘I can grow a bigger pumpkin.’”

For a \$25 fee, group members get a how-to booklet, a packet of seeds and a list of growers. The group schedules a free pumpkin patch tour for the public in late July, where gardens are covered with gigantic pumpkins and gourds.

Growing Like Crazy!

Giant pumpkins grow so fast, you can almost watch them expand.

The vines can grow 6 inches a day and the pumpkins themselves can add 2 pounds per hour.

The pumpkins begin as seeds — of the Atlantic Giant variety. Many giant-pumpkin owners crossbreed seeds or get seeds from prize-winning pumpkins. Just because the pumpkins are huge doesn’t mean they are filled with thousands of seeds — many have only 100 to 200.

Seeds can sell for as much as \$500 each. Chris Stevens of New Richmond sold one seed from his 2010 world record pumpkin at a charity auction for \$1,600. But growers mostly swap seeds or give them to other hopeful gardeners.

The World Record Of Pumpkins

Pockets of giant-pumpkin growers have sprouted around Wisconsin, usually because someone sees their friend or neighbor growing them and wants to try it. New Richmond is one city with a giant-pumpkin-growing scene. Stevens is one of about a half dozen growers there.

Stevens grew a 1,810-pound giant in 2010 that broke the world record. The record didn’t stand for long, though. In fact, the world record has been broken nine out of the past 10 years.

The biggest pumpkin so far this year, and the current world record holder, is a 2,096-pound pumpkin from Switzerland. Stevens’ biggest pumpkin this year is about 1,400 pounds.

“That’s disappointing to me. People say, ‘What do you mean you’re disappointed?’ Well, when you’ve had 1,800 pounds, yes, it’s disappointing,” Stevens said.

Five Wisconsin cities feature giant-pumpkin weigh-offs: Cedarburg, Chippewa Falls, Sturgeon Bay, Nekoosa and Mishicot. Wisconsin growers often travel to weigh-offs in other states.

Giant Pumpkins Are Serious Business

It’s not easy to grow a giant pumpkin. Seeds are planted in small pots in April and grown indoors for two weeks before they’re put into the ground. Gardeners have to think ahead and leave enough room for the vine to spread out and the giant pumpkin to grow. A plot for one giant pumpkin is generally about 25 feet by 35 feet.

Flowers are usually hand-pollinated — growers move pollen from male flowers to female flowers by hand. Then, the growers remove all flowers but one from the plant, so all the energy can be focused on one fruit, said Irwin Goldman, chairman of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Horticulture.

“It’s not a simple thing to do even though to an outside observer it looks easy. It’s actually a bit of a challenge,” Goldman said.

Goldman and UW-Madison horticulture professor James Nienhuis have grown giant pumpkins for several years. Even though theirs only reach 400 pounds, that is still big enough to carve them into boats for students to race in at the Giant Pumpkin Regatta on Lake Mendota.

One of Nienhuis’ students made a chart of record-setting giant pumpkins dating back to 1950 and learned each year the winner has gone up an average of 20 to 30 pounds.

“That’s all due to selection. A big question is how much of that is due to genetics and how much is due to environment,” Nienhuis said. “Wisconsin is a good place to grow them. They grow best where you have large bodies of water with high humidity. You have to irrigate constantly and fertilize like crazy with nitrogen.”

Don't Make Fun!

At weigh-offs, where the giant pumpkins compete, they cannot be broken, have holes or excessive rot. Growers must use tractors and special harnesses to lift the pumpkins onto trucks to travel to the scales.

The growers are competing for prize money, plaques and bragging rights, but they say the true rewards are something different. They enjoy seeing the looks on strangers' faces when they spot the giant pumpkins. Eyes grow wide. Mouths drop open.

“Put it this way — I don’t make fun of other people’s hobbies,” Stevens said. “As dorky as it seems, this time of year when you’re hauling them in your trailer people think it’s just absolutely amazing. It’s crazy how cool they are.”

Quiz

- 1 According to the article, which of the following sentences is NOT CORRECT?
- (A) Each year the weight of the winning pumpkin goes up by 20 to 30 pounds.
 - (B) The rules for the contest are set by the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth.
 - (C) Pumpkin growers from Wisconsin win the competition each year.
 - (D) Many giant-pumpkin growers crossbreed seeds for better results.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Giant Pumpkins Are Serious Business" that describes the favorable conditions required for pumpkins to grow huge in size.
- 3 Which of the following subheads means "a natural or inherited characteristic"?
- (A) "It's In Our Blood"
 - (B) Growing Like Crazy!
 - (C) The World Record Of Pumpkins
 - (D) Giant Pumpkins Are Serious Business
- 4 Read paragraph 4 under the subhead "The World Record of Pumpkins." Which of these options correctly paraphrases the question asked by people to Stevens?
- (A) I don't think I completely agree with you when you say you're disappointed.
 - (B) I don't fully understand why or what you're disappointed about.
 - (C) I think I'm having a hard time following what the different things that disappoint you are.
 - (D) I think I'll need you to tell me what about this situation disappoints you, so I can help.