



Columbia Nursery

Pumpkin Growing Guide for Northwest Montana (Zones 3-5)

Introduction

Pumpkins are a fun and rewarding crop to grow in Northwest Montana, whether you're growing sweet pie pumpkins, ornamental miniatures, or record-breaking giants. With our short growing season, careful planning is key to success.

Pumpkin Growing Basics

- USDA Zones: 3-5 (use season extension techniques when needed)
- Growing Season: 85-120 days, depending on variety
- Sun Requirements: Full sun (6-8 hours minimum)
- Soil Needs: Well-drained, fertile soil, pH 6.0-7.0
- Watering: Deep, regular watering at the base of plants

Choosing Pumpkin Varieties

Type	Use	Days to Maturity
Sugar Pie	Baking, cooking	90-100 days
Jack O'Lantern	Carving	100-110 days
Mini Pumpkins (Jack Be Little)	Decoration	85-95 days
Atlantic Giant	Competition-size pumpkins	120+ days

Starting Pumpkins from Seed

Indoor Seed Starting

- When: Mid to late May (4-6 weeks before last frost)
- Containers: Use 4-inch peat pots or biodegradable containers to prevent root disturbance
- Care: Keep soil at 65-75°F, provide good light



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Transplanting Seedlings

- Timing: Mid to late June, when nighttime temps stay above 50°F
- Hardening Off: Acclimate plants to outdoor conditions over 5-7 days
- Planting Depth: Same depth as in container
- Spacing: Bush varieties: 3-4 feet apart; Vining varieties: 5-6 feet apart or in mounds 6 feet apart

Direct Seeding Outdoors (Optional)

- Timing: After the last frost, typically June 10-20
- Soil Temp: Minimum 65°F for germination
- How to Plant: Sow 2-3 seeds per hill, 1 inch deep; Thin to the strongest seedling; Use black plastic mulch to warm soil and conserve moisture

Note: Due to the short season in NW Montana, starting indoors is recommended for reliable yields.

Caring for Pumpkin Plants

Task	Guidance
Watering	Deep, consistent watering; avoid leaves
Fertilizing	Start with balanced fertilizer; switch to high phosphorus & potassium once flowering starts
Weeding	Mulch helps reduce weeds
Pollination	Remove covers when flowers bloom to allow bees
Pest Control	Monitor for squash bugs & cucumber beetles

Pruning and Fruit Management

- For large pumpkins, select 1-2 fruits per vine and remove the rest.
- Pinch off vine tips after fruits set to focus plant energy on existing pumpkins.
- Place a board or pallet under each pumpkin to prevent rot and flattening.
- Gently turn pumpkins occasionally for even shape and color.



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Special Care for Giant Pumpkins

- Start seeds 8 weeks before last frost
- Use varieties bred for size (e.g., Atlantic Giant)
- Once vines start producing, remove all but one pumpkin per plant
- Snip vine tips to redirect energy to the chosen fruit
- Top-dress fertilizer every 2-3 weeks, especially where the vine roots into the ground
- Place a sturdy board or pallet under the giant fruit for support

Harvesting and Storage

- When to Harvest: Skin is hard and cannot be punctured with a fingernail; Stem turns brown and dry; Typically late September to early October
- How to Harvest: Use pruning shears or a sharp knife; Leave 2-3 inches of stem to prevent rot
- Curing: Cure in a warm, dry place for 10 days
- Storage: Store in a cool, dry area at 50-55°F

Quick Reference Calendar

Task	Approximate Dates
Start Seeds Indoors	May 10-25
Transplant or Direct Seed	June 10-20
First Flowers Appear	Mid-July
Fruit Development	July-August
Harvest	Late Sept-Early Oct

Need Help?

Stop by our garden center for personalized advice on pumpkin varieties, fertilizers, and supplies for a successful harvest!