



The Story Behind the Jack O'Lantern

By Kaelin Smith, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

The pumpkin is synonymous with autumn. The orange fruit has many uses, but pumpkin carving might be the most iconic. This popular American tradition did not originate in the states, but rather in Europe. The concept of pumpkin carving is based on an old Irish folktale about a trickster named “Stingy Jack”. The story explains how Jack-o-lanterns came to be and how they got their name.

True to his name, Jack was stingy and disagreeable; this type of behavior attracted the devil. As the tale goes, Jack escaped death twice by deceiving the devil. The first time the devil sought out Jack out, he evaded the devil’s keeping by convincing the demon to transform into a silver coin. Jack proceeded to place the coin in his pocket next to a silver cross. Unable to switch back to his initial shape, the devil was forced to bargain with Jack for his freedom. This encounter earned Jack one more year until his soul was to be claimed.

At their second meeting, Jack tricked the devil into climbing a tree. While the devil was picking a piece of fruit, Jack carved crosses into the trunk of the tree. This time the deal was that the devil was to leave Jack alone for ten years. Eventually Jack died and neither God nor the Devil would claim his soul. God didn’t see Jack as worthy of going to heaven and it had not been ten years since Jack and the Devil had made their deal. The Devil left Jack in the dark with only a burning coal. He then placed the coal into a carved turnip. According to the story, Jack has been roaming the earth with his Jack-O-Lantern ever since.

Jack is said to have placed the burning coal into a turnip that he was eating. The reason we carve pumpkins instead of turnips is due to their wide availability in America. Pumpkins are native to the southwestern United States, Mexico, Central America and into northern countries of South America. Before being used as a fall decoration,

Native Americans grew pumpkins for food and as weaving material for mats. The cultivation of pumpkins dates to 3500 B.C. making it one of the first food crops to be grown in the Americas. The earliest evidence of pumpkins were seeds found in a cave in Oaxaca, Mexico. Similar to other ancient crops, the original pumpkins were much smaller than the varieties we are familiar

with today. They tasted more bitter than the pumpkins we are familiar with and were primarily grown for their hard flesh instead of seeds. The pumpkins that are available today are larger in size and have thinner walls that make them easier to carve.



Pumpkins for sale, Photo by dmp2020

If you are planning on carving a Jack-O-Lantern this year, here are a few tips to make sure you pick the perfect pumpkin. A good carving pumpkin should be deep orange and hollow. Knocking on it and listening to the sound it makes is a good way to check if it is hollow. Try not to pick your pumpkin up by the stem, as an attached stem keeps the fruit from decaying prematurely. Do lift your pumpkin up and look underneath to ensure that there is no rot. A flat bottom is also beneficial to prevent your masterpiece from falling over. Remember, the larger the pumpkin the easier it is to carve. Smaller pumpkins are great for painting or decorating the house. The Jack-be-little variety are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand and can last for months when kept out of direct sunlight. These tiny fruits are edible as well. Other edible varieties are Sugar Pie Pumpkins, Cinderella Pumpkins, and New England Pie Pumpkins. Get creative this fall and make your own Jack-O-Lanterns, soup, or pie! There are so many varieties of pumpkins and an endless number of ways to use them.

For information on growing pumpkins or on other gardening topics feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit our web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension office.