

Home/Garden

Giant pumpkins

By PETER TONGE
The Christian Science Monitor

MORRISVILLE, Vt. — From the road there isn't much to distinguish Don Flemming's farm from a hundred others in this northwestern tip of New England. But behind the barn, where the grazing lands begin, there's a small plot of unusual ground. For one thing it is strewn with old auto tires and fenced in with a fine plastic mesh.

Last year it even brought a measure of world fame to the dairy farming community here — and, says a satisfied resident, "for a few days we were more than just the neighboring town to Stowe (the well-known ski resort)."

What caused the stir was the Great Pumpkin Don Flemming grew among all those old tires. When it was placed on the scale down at the pumpkin weigh-in in Topsfield,

Mass., last October, it hit 500 pounds. That was enough to make it the World Pumpkin Confederation champion for 1987.

Now for an American to produce the champion pumpkin, against the regular strong challengers from the rest of the world, including 1986 New Zealand, is not unusual. But New Englanders are not expected to be prominent among them. Their growing season is simply too short. And for someone like Mr. Flemming, who lives way up in ski country, to even try was considered a feat.

What makes the tale even more astonishing is that Flemming isn't a professional grower. He was a building contractor until he retired a few years ago.

So how was he able to raise pumpkins so successfully?

Well, that's where the tires come in. And he did do a few other things that are out of the ordinary, too.

He knew from his contracting experience that a house sited on a southerly slope is warmer than others. He learned from neighbors that full morning sun is considered slightly more beneficial than the afternoon variety.

So he had the bulldozers come in and grade his plot so that it slopes gently to the south-southeast.

To enhance the growing climate still further, Flemming surrounded the plot with a net fence that filters the wind down to a pleasing breeze. Then he brought in the old auto tires. "Maybe a hundred of them. I didn't count," he says. These were placed two and three deep in short rows here and there around the plot.

You might say they fooled the pumpkins into thinking they were growing down in New Jersey or some similar place where giant pumpkins are more commonplace.

Back in 1986 these climate modifiers proved themselves in an important way. That year, the Flemming farm had a frost as late as June 11 and as early as Aug 25, a mere 10 and 1/2 weeks later.

Even so, Flemming grew a 530-pound monster that earned him the New England title and the heightened respect of everyone in the pumpkin-growing world.

Here was someone who started out with an 80-pounder the first time he tried growing giant pumpkins, in '84, jumped to 300 pounds the next year, and now was topping 500 pounds — an awesome size whether it wins the top prize or not. Even so, few thought Flemming could ever win the world championship outright. But the Morrisville resident had one further wrinkle to try out that took him all the way to the top.

At the suggestion of Paul Zabriskie, an irrigation expert in nearby Burlington, he added soaker hose to his armory. Soaker hose is sometimes called leaky hose, because water seeps evenly out of the hose throughout its length.

Because pumpkins — like many other vining crops — send roots down into the soil wherever they crawl, the soaker hose, crisscrossing the pumpkin plot six inches below the surface, is ideal. Not only could it be used to irrigate, but also to feed the growing vine with liquid fertilizer when necessary.

Flemming used the new "tool" to good effect. This is how he grows his giant pumpkins:

- The previous fall, liberal quantities of cow manure are plowed in. The following spring the soil is tilled, and 1,000 feet of soaker hose is buried five to six inches deep in parallel rows about two feet apart. Then the tires and the net fencing are brought in.

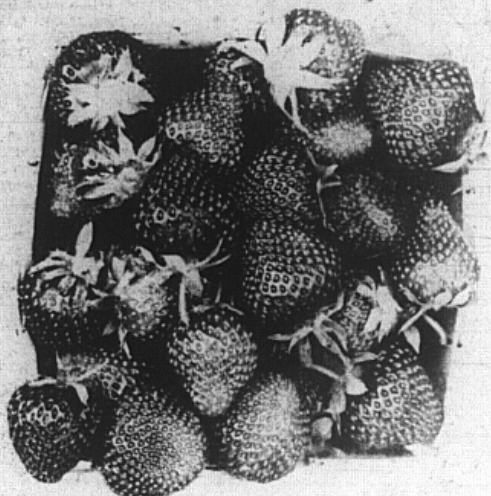
- Pumpkin seeds are started in peat pots the last few days of April and put out under plastic canopies about 10 days later. Several plants are set out (10 this year).

- Most pumpkins are culled until the most vigorous two or three vines are left to set fruit. When fruits reach softball size or slightly larger, they, too, are culled, leaving only one fruit per vine.

- As it happened, 1987 was a dry summer in much of New England, but the Flemming pumpkins with water and Peters 15-30-15 fertilizer at their roots were not aware of it.

- After his triumph, Don Flemming was approached with offers to buy his Great Pumpkin. But he turned them all down. He had other ideas. That Halloween, the kids of Morrisville had the biggest jack-o'-lantern they'd ever seen.

Soaker hose, such as Hydro-Grow, Wet-Flex, and Aquapore, is available from many sources: Gardener's Supply, 128 Intervale Road, Burlington, VT 05401; Nitron Industries, PO Box 400, Fayetteville, AR 72702; The Urban Farm Store, 2833 Vicente St., San Francisco, CA 94116.



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CSM graphic/Bob Dahn

Late plantings

Even in New England we are late in the planting season, but that doesn't mean that it's too late to plant or that the time for all planting is over.

Many plants like the brassicas (cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower), lettuces and spinach which can be planted early because they are tolerant of cool or even cold weather, greens like kale and mustard whose flavor is improved by a cold snap, and root crops like carrots and beets that are not bothered by those first cool days of autumn, are all candidates for the late garden.

In addition to cold tolerant plants, check through your seed packets to see which vegetables have a very short season and reach maturity quickly. Swiss chard and many of the oriental greens which are so fashionable these days are ready for harvest in 50 days or just slightly more.

No matter what the hardiness zone map says, think carefully about the micro climate in your own garden. The news might be bad; my neighbor down the hill lives in a frost pocket. On the other hand, my garden, just a couple of hundred feet, sits on a southern slope where the breezes blow all those early frosts away.

If you have some seeds left over from the spring planting, you are not risking very much to stick them in the ground and see what benefit you can reap. You may not have time to harvest beet roots, but in my family my husband prefers the greens anyway.

Seeds need moist soil to germinate and this is even more important during the hot, dry days of summer. Keep your new seed bed well watered until the seedlings are up and established.

You might find that the stand that sells bedding plants has a few flats of vegetables left over. It's worth a stop. We eat lots of broccoli at our house, and at the same time that I set out my broccoli seedlings, I planted a nursery bed of broccoli. These seedlings are now ready to be transplanted in a freshly prepared bed.

Some people plant nursery beds right out in the garden and some replant some of the flats they started indoors under lights in the house. The choice is yours.

When it's time to transplant those seedling into the garden it's important to fertilize the soil at the same time. Try and rotate your crops; don't put broccoli where the cauliflower or any other brassica grew before, and dig in rotted manure and compost.

Plants need a healthy and rich soil to flourish. If you have planted and

Pat
Leuchtman

Between
The Rows

harvested one crop, that soil will have fewer nutrients and will need to be replenished.

Remember all those supplies you bought in the spring to get a jump on the season? Floating row covers, hoops and clear plastic, cold frames? They are just as useful in the fall. You won't need them when you plant your seeds and seedlings, but as they come to maturity and the weather gets nippier sooner than you had expected (hoped), they can provide protection and extend the season.

Don't think you need a greenhouse or fancy cold frame. Clear plastic laid over wire hoops and at the edges will do very well. The biggest problem may be insuring that your vegetables don't get fried. Some row covers are slitted to provide the necessary ventilation, but if you make sure sure to open the ends to allow for a free flow of air during the warm days you'll be fine. Make sure to fasten them closed towards the end of the day.

We just replaced a lot of our house windows and I've been thinking that the old ones could be laid over cinderblocks (uncovered when we tore down our rotted porch) or old hay bales to form a very temporary and makeshift, but functional, cold frame.

When you are out in the garden planting seeds or seedlings in their newly fertilized beds, you might also want to think about giving your other crops a little boost. Apply a side dressing of rotted manure or compost, or give them a drink of manure tea. Only use manure tea when the ground is already moist from a rain or deep watering.

You might want to try a foliar feeding. Again, when the soil is moist, spray the plants with a dilute solution of liquid sea weed. I like my little Hudson sprayer that I use in the spring to spray the fruit trees with dormant oil, but you can use a watering can just as well. Plants take nutrients in through their leaves as well as through their roots so this is another way of giving them a mid-season boost.

If you haven't done as much in the garden as you planned there's always next year — but a lot of this year is still left. Don't put away the trowel yet.

If you want to grow your own...

By PETER TONGE
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If you are interested in growing a Great Pumpkin — or tomato, or sunflower, or whatever — you have to begin by choosing a variety that is genetically programmed to grow big.

As the little elfman once said to the inquiring boy: "I'm just as big for me you see, as you are big for you."

Put another way, the Sugar Baby pumpkin will never challenge for the world title no matter how much TLC you shower upon it.

There are several pumpkin breeds with the capacity to grow huge, but the one that has dominated the international pumpkin scene since the late 1970s is Dill's Atlantic Giant, available from the World Pumpkin Confederation.

Given the right breed, cultivation becomes of prime importance:

- Soil — Sandy loam is the ideal, but any soil, clay, or sand can be conditioned with large amounts of compost, and aged or composted manure. Use fresh manure only if it can be tilled into the soil 4 to 6 weeks before planting, but preferably the previous fall.

- Sun — Pumpkins need full sun. If you haven't a bright sunny area, find a friend who has, or else don't try.

- Planting — Sow seeds about 1/2 inch deep, with the pointed end facing down. If you have started the plants in a peat pot indoors, transplant them outdoors when the third true leaf starts to

Loosen the soil in a 20-foot circle around the plant, and if you can protect the growing site on the north and west from winds, so much the better.

- Fertilizing — Pumpkin seedlings can be fertilized with a liquid fertilizer (say 15-30-15) at half strength once a week for the first three or four weeks. After that, to full-strength applications every 10 to 14 days. For best results, applying the fertilizer through a hose-end attachment, you water the plants in the same way to do this.

- Watering — Pumpkins need a consistent supply of water to attain vigorous growth. Water deeply at five-day intervals as a good rule of thumb if the soil is dry. Check the soil after watering. Top 12 inches should be very moist.

- Special care — Give your vines plenty of space (18 to 24 feet between plants is optimum). After several pumpkins are formed, select the finest and reach soccer-ball size, and cut off the rest. Allow the vines to grow, but remove them when they're nice to eat.

- Pumpkin vines send strong taproots all along the length of the vines. The more roots, the better — but not within three feet of either side of the main pumpkin, for this reason. As the trailing vine off to the side often by as much as 10 feet, uncut, these roots would lift the stem to the ground, so it couldn't lift up. The resulting strain could eventually tear the stem from the fruit ... and your pumpkin would grow no more.

For more information, contact the World Pumpkin Confederation.