AleX Noel's Giant Pumpkin Growing Tips

Have you ever wanted to grow a giant pumpkin? These tips will help you grow a 400+ pound pumpkin in your very first season!

**Tip 1. Go to bigpumpkins.com** and read everything you can. This is where I learned much of what I know about growing giant pumpkins, and the top growers of the world frequent its message boards. Don't be afraid to ask questions, though; the site is full of new people too, and is where almost everybody starts their learning process.

**Tip 2. Use Atlantic Giant pumpkin seeds.** You can buy them from most seed catalogs, but higher quality seed can be obtained for free by requesting it on bigpumpkins.com. The growers are extremely generous.

**Tip 3. Prepare your patch** as soon as the ground completely thaws. Choose a spot that receives as much full direct sun as possible. Add manure, compost, leaf and grass clippings, old hay bales, coffee grounds, egg shells, banana peels, old bread, and aaaaaanything that rots – as much as you can.

**Tip 4. Start your seeds** in a plastic cup with potting soil. The soil should be moist, but not soaking. Every seed may not sprout, so plant extras. It helps to put the pots in a warm place: on top of a fridge, near a furnace or wood stove; warm them to a little bit above room temperature to speed up germination. Not too hot though!

**Tip 5. Once seeds have sprouted, transplant them outdoors** almost immediately. The roots of an Atlantic Giant seedling will fill even a huge pot within days - they are amazing plants! Transplant after all danger of frost is gone, as these plants do not like cold. If you have a coldframe or greenhouse, you can start a little earlier, but it won't make much difference in the end. When transplanting, give each plant at least 300 square feet to spread.

**Tip 6.** From the time they go in the ground until early June, pumpkins need **phosphorus**. Phosphorus helps plants to grow roots, and in the early part of the season, this is what pumpkins need to do. If you buy fertilizer, phosphorus is the middle number in the 3-number sequence on the labels (e.g., 5-5-5, or 12-10-8); the higher the middle number the better for early season root growth.

**Tip 7.** The second half of June, and almost all of July, is for growing vines. Vines need **nitrogen** to grow, and nitrogen is the first number of the 3 on fertilizer labels, so choose a fertilizer with a high first number until the end of July.
Tip 8. The other thing to consider starting in mid-June are pests. Pests include both the obvious (GROUNDHOGS, deer, raccoons, a horse that thought your pumpkin patch looked like a good place to walk, and what will seem like an infinite number of different types of bugs), and the not-so-obvious (viruses, mildews, and molds). Diseases and different types of rots are complicated to deal with, and will not ruin a season by any means, so I will leave that out of this beginners’ manual, but bugs should be dealt with, at least in some way. A general-purpose spray-on pesticide will do the trick to help out the first year grower, and keep bugs at bay.

Tip 9. Pollination! Pollination can be done either by hand or naturally. Hand pollination is useful for making specific crosses, but for first year purposes, natural (bee) pollination, will work just fine. Pollination will occur naturally on a healthy plant between the end of June and the end of July. Pollination has happened when you see tiny pumpkins growing at the base of the flowers.

Tip 10. Select a fruit. Toward the end of July, it is time to select ONE pumpkin on each plant that you will focus all of your, and all of your plant's, energy on for the rest of the season. It will be difficult to choose only one fruit per plant, but this will help your pumpkin’s weight to absolutely skyrocket. Choose one of the biggest pumpkins on your plant, as it has the biggest head start already, BUT if one of the biggest ones is growing faster than the other ones, choose that one over one that is just a little bigger than it. Cut off every other pumpkin on the plant.

Tip 11. August means you finally get to learn what being a giant pumpkin grower is all about. Your pumpkins will put on their most weight in August. Two extremely important things happen at the end of July and beginning of August, other than fruit selection. One is pruning. As crazy as it sounds, once you have selected one pumpkin on a plant, take a knife and cut off all new vine growth. Cutting off the small fuzzy growing tips of every vine that you come across (there will be a lot), forces the plant to put every bit of energy it has into your prized pumpkin. Do this often in August. The other big end-of-July concept is fertilizer. It's time to switch from high nitrogen to high potassium, the third number in the fertilizer label sequence. The higher the better, as potassium makes pumpkins grow.

Tip 12. Enjoy. The work is basically over when September comes, so breathe a big sigh of relief, and look at what all your hard work and long days have gotten you. This will not be the case for everyone, as unexpected issues, mistakes, and catastrophes will always occur, but I hope that most of the people who read these tips will begin September with the most impressive, indescribable, and immovable vegetable that you have ever seen. As the month goes on, and the plant dies away, you have only one thing left to do, and that is......

Tip 13. Weigh it! The culmination of the season, the long anticipated day, the most fun and excitement you may have all year: WeighOff Day! A weighoff can be located by talking to other local growers on the always-trustworthy bigpumpkins.com. You can weigh and show your pumpkin at almost any county fair, but it is more fun and educational to bring it to a place where you have some competition, and some fellow growers to share notes and start planning next season with.

Good Luck, and Good Growing everybody! And more importantly than anything I have put down on this list, take to heart how kind, generous, and especially forthcoming with information the pumpkin growing community that you have now entered is, and someday when you are an experienced grower, make sure to take some time out of your schedule too, and help pass along the knowledge, and to further proliferate the sport that we all love so much.