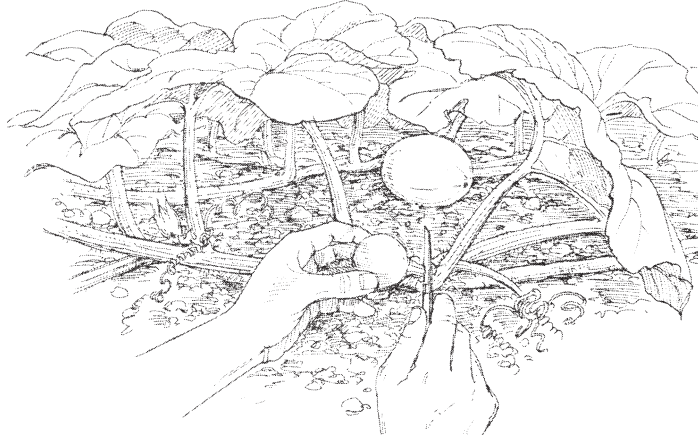


Raising a Giant Pumpkin

1 START the seeds

Pumpkins require a long growing season (115 days or more) and their seeds need warm soil (75-85 degrees Fahrenheit) to germinate, so it's best to start the seeds indoors. Plant them about two or three weeks before your last expected frost. Pressed fiber or peat pots (preferably four inches in diameter) can be planted into the garden, pot and all, to avoid damage to the delicate roots. Fill the pots with damp, sterile potting mix to within an inch of the rim, and gently firm it in. Place two seeds, pointed ends down, in each container and cover them with an inch of mix. Set the pots in a warm spot, such as on top of the refrigerator or near a stove. Check the pots daily and water when the mix is dry to the touch. As soon as the seeds sprout—usually in five days or so—place the pots on a bright windowsill, in a greenhouse, or under fluorescent light fixtures. When the first true leaves appear, thin to one plant per pot by cutting off the weaker seedling with scissors.



2 PREPARE the soil

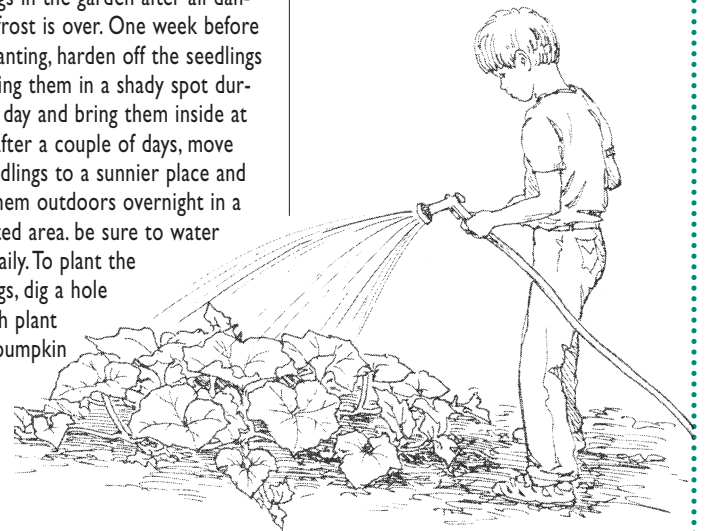
While the seedlings are growing indoors, prepare the pumpkin patch. Start by choosing a sunny location, protected from strong winds. For really huge pumpkins, the vines need plenty of space; allow at least 6 feet between plants. Next, amend the soil with plenty of well-rotted manure or compost. If possible, cover the entire patch with a three-inch layer of well-rotted manure or compost, plus a sprinkling of fertilizer, such as an organic vegetable mix. If you don't have that manure or compost on hand, concentrate what you do have into six-foot circles or hills for each plant. Till or dig the amendments into the soil.

3 TRANSPLANT the seedlings

Plan to set your pumpkin seedlings in the garden after all danger of frost is over. One week before transplanting, harden off the seedlings by placing them in a shady spot during the day and bring them inside at night. After a couple of days, move the seedlings to a sunnier place and leave them outdoors overnight in a protected area. Be sure to water them daily. To plant the seedlings, dig a hole for each plant in the pumpkin patch.

4 WATER and FERTILIZE

As the pumpkins grow, keep the soil evenly moist, but not soggy. Pumpkin vines develop an extensive root system because they are capable of sending down new roots at every leaf node. Be sure to irrigate the entire growing area so all of these roots are watered evenly. Watering in the morning will let the foliage dry before nightfall. Feed each vine weekly with liquid fertilizer, such as fish emulsion, according to the directions on the label.



5 THIN excess FRUITS

When baby pumpkins appear, select two that are on separate runners, about 6 to 10 feet from the center of the plant. Ideally, each pumpkin's stem should be at a 90-degree angle to its runner, so that the growing pumpkin will not push off the runner and force the stem to bend and possibly break. Cut off the rest of the fruits, and any that set later in the summer. This forces the vine's energy into producing a few large pumpkins, rather than a lot of smaller ones. From mid-August to harvest time, about October 1, the pumpkins grow at an amazing rate. It can be fun to measure them and keep a progress record, but be careful not to break their fragile stems.

