

*"O, it sets my heart a clicken' like
the ticken' of a clock,
When the frost is on the punkin'
And the fodder's in the shock."*

James Whitcomb Riley



Autumn is here again. It is that magical season when the leaves burst into color and treat us to the viewing of some marvelous sights. A sugar Maple outside my window at the Geddy House offers me a spectacular sight. I consider this annual event one of nature's special gifts to me. Nature also provides the decorations for the Halloween celebrations in October. An anonymous 17th century poet said, "We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon, if it were not for pumpkins we should be undone."

Although the pumpkin is associated with Halloween and enjoyed as a Jack o' lantern today, it was not that way when the colonist came to North America and found the Indians growing and eating pumpkins.

The word "pumpkin" comes from the Latin word peponem. It became pompion in old French, pompion or pumpion in English. Washington Irving called it pompion in 1828 and finally, today, we call it pumpkin. The Sioux word for pumpkin is Wagamoo.

When the Apache Indians grew pumpkins, they encouraged good crops by holding ceremonies to ensure good harvests. They had young boys scatter Juniper berries over the pumpkin patch in the belief that more pumpkins would grow wherever the berries landed. Another tribe that grew pumpkins were the Catabas, aka Esau or Issa, which means river. They lived along the Santee and Wateree Rivers in North and South Carolina. They did a lot of trading with the white settlers and it is believed that the Catabas received from them in trade the knowledge of using baking soda to make dough rise. They learned to make what is known today as Prince Albert Pumpkin Bread.

The Moravians in North Carolina were eating pumpkins for supper. They wrote in 1754, "In the morning we have mush with milk or drippings, at supper mush with drippings, or pumpkins, or squash."

The earliest mention of pumpkins I found was by John Parkinson in Paradise in Sole. He wrote of the use of pompions, "They are boyled in faire

water and salt, or in powdered beefe brothe, or sometimes in milk, and so eaten, or else buttered.”

In colonial times, they also boiled pumpkins and made soup and it was common to slice and dry pumpkins. Mrs. Frances Bland Tucker Coalter in Virginia in 1801 had this receipt for Mrs. B. Pynpkin Fritters: “The pumpkin must be well boiled, left from dinner. Take four Spoonfuls Pumpkin, two eggs, one half Pint to more of Milk (or Cream if you wish) one or more Tablespoonfuls of brown Sugar, Thicken with Wheat Flour about the thickness of batter for Waffles well beaten and light. Fry in boiling Lard two or three Spoonfuls for each Fritter. Tried and found good.”

The first published pumpkin receipts in an American cook book was in 1796 in American Cookery by Amelia Simmons. We know that many of the Virginia planters were growing pumpkins. George Washington grew them in his kitchen garden at Mt. Vernon. Thomas Jefferson mentions planting white pumpkins, solid pumpkins from South America, and Long pumpkins from Malta. I wonder what a Long pumpkin looks like. Jefferson grew some pumpkins for animal fodder as well. In 1796 he wrote, “less than an acre of pumpkins have fed 9 horses at Shadwell 5 weeks.” He added, “An acre of pumpkins then is equivalent to 5 acres of corn.”

Landon Carter told us how he planted his pompious “4 seeds in a hill” in May, 1766.

I do love this magical season. I love the nip in the air, the beautiful leaves falling about, stacks of firewood ready for burning in fireplaces, and fields of round, orange pumpkins just waiting to be chosen and transformed into a scary or happy faced jack o’lantern. All of this is truly American in the fall of the year.

Other countries have some fall traditions of their own. Because of the abundance of potatoes in Ireland, one of their Halloween customs is to eat a dish called Colcannon on Halloween. It contains mashed potatoes, boiled, shredded cabbage, butter, parsley and onions, cooked in milk.

This year there is a shortage of Virginia pumpkins due to the weather conditions of the summer. Therefore, I recommend that you hurry to your garden or field or roadside stand and select your Halloween pumpkin, but if you cannot find a presentable one, you can have Colcannon for dinner and have an Irish Halloween this year.

*Happy Halloween,
Janet Guthrie*

