



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Steve Hoult and customers at his Whitchurch-Stouffville pumpkin farm. A large amount of rain has hurt this year's pumpkin crop. "I've never seen anything like this," said one farmer.

Pumpkin farmers deal with problems

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Like most farmers, Hoult can make the best of a difficult situation. Somehow, he's managing to meet his customers' expectations. Hoult knows if you don't have pumpkin pie, you might as well cancel Thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, Hoult knows how very important the jack-o'-lantern is to everyone's Halloween. "The kids still come here and get a pumpkin. They just might not be as large," said Hoult's father Ivan.

Growers are aware of the jack-o'-lantern's cultural significance. Hoult knows the carved pumpkin is named after a European named Jack. He was a troubled man, doomed to wander the earth with a lantern. According to legend, Jack was simply too evil for heaven and the devil wouldn't take him. So when he died in a tavern on All Hallows' Eve, the devil turned up and presented him with a piece of burning coal. Jack put the hot coal in a turnip and used it to light his way. From that day on, the people in Great Britain and France would carry a lantern on the eve of Oct. 31.

Before pumpkins came into vogue, lanterns were carved out of turnips or beets. Jack-o'-lanterns were displayed outside of homes to show sympathy for damned souls like Jack.

When the early settlers came to North America, they found pumpkins. Because turnips were scarce and pumpkins were larger and more colourful, the pumpkin replaced the turnip for the legendary jack-o'-lanterns.

Today, the pumpkin business is a big business, playing a major role in vegetable farmers' produce.

A pumpkin has many uses, going far beyond pie and Halloween. In fact, there are 25 varieties. Pumpkin soup, usually served cold, is viewed as a delicacy, while pumpkin is the main ingredient in many specialty cakes. And many wine tasters will say pumpkin wine has a pleasing and unique taste.

Sue and Brian Feddema, owners of Around the Bend Farm near Holland Landing, have been growing fall vegetables for 11 years. Their produce, including pumpkins, squash, carrots, cabbage and onions, is sold at a roadside market on Aurora Road near Jane Street.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Sue. "We usually grow between 10,000 and 20,000 pumpkins. This year, we grew less than 4,000. It's a loss, a terrible loss."

The yield is usually so plentiful that the Feddemas are able to build large pumpkin hills to be displayed along Aurora Rd. "You don't get the customers if you don't have the piles," said Feddema.

Growers were forced to do their harvest early. The still-green pumpkins were getting dangerously soft.

"We put them in the piles. They will orange up on a pile, at least, to a certain degree. If we left them in the field, they'd turn to mush," said Feddema.

When it comes to growing pumpkins, Jay Reesor, owner of Farmer's Market in Markham, is doing better than most. "It's not a bumper year," he said. "But I managed to get mine in earlier than most. I may not have quite as many as last year, but they did colour up in the field and are average in size."

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