

Hang on to that jack-o'-lantern

by Sabine Eiche

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From the air, Richmond's farm fields at this season appear covered with orange polka-dots. Close up, the polka dots become pumpkins, soon to be pressed into service as jack-o'-lanterns – tops sliced off, seeds scooped out and faces carved into monstrous leers, all to delight the children at Halloween.

Jack-o'-lantern was originally – in the 16th century – a term for ignis fatuus, also known as will-o'-the-wisp. Ignis fatuus is Latin for foolish fire, and it refers to an erratic flame-like phosphorescence flitting from place to place over marshy ground, which is caused by the spontaneous combustion of gases from decaying vegetation. It wasn't until the early 19th century that jack-o'-lantern meant a vegetable lantern (to begin with, turnips and thick cabbage stems were used), and it was only in the second half of the 19th century that jack-o'-lantern became associated with Halloween.

The word Halloween derives from the Scottish term All-hallow-even (even is a shortened form of evening), first recorded in 1556. Some believe that our celebration of Halloween was influenced by the feast of Samhain, which marked the last day of the year in the Celtic calendar, corresponding to October 31. The night of Samhain was the time when witches and warlocks scurried about, and bonfires were lit to ward off evil spirits (hence the traditionally ghoulish character of Halloween costumes). In the Christian religion, Halloween was the evening before All Hallows (also called All Saints), November 1, which together with November 2, All Souls, were the holy days for remembering the saints and martyrs and the recently deceased.

In this part of the world, November 1 and 2 have more to do with forgetting than remembering. Stores lose no time whisking Halloween leftovers into the ½ price bins, and householders fling jack-o'-lanterns into the garbage. As far as I'm concerned, such treatment of the faithful pumpkin is an example of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. You'd be well served to hang on to that jack-o'-lantern – it's still got lots to offer.

Did you know that pumpkin is rich in vitamins A and E, potassium and fibre, that it's low in calories, easy to digest and doesn't cause allergies? The carotenoids in pumpkin enhance the immune system, protect the circulatory system, and reduce the risks of lung cancer and cataracts.

Italians eat lots of pumpkin – as a filling for ravioli, a condiment for pasta, or in risotto. Pumpkin also makes a delicious soup. In a large saucepan pour some olive oil, and over medium heat gently brown a washed and sliced leek. Reduce heat, add a potato and about 1 ½ pounds of pumpkin, all peeled and diced fairly small, salt, pepper, a few fresh sage leaves and parsley. Cook slowly, adding a little broth if too dry, until pumpkin and potato are soft, around 30 minutes. Puree vegetables with an immersion blender in the saucepan, adding broth until the desired consistency is reached (see also <http://www.sharingfarm.ca/2011/10/save-the-savoury-pumpkin-2/>).

Oh, and those seeds you scooped out – roast or bake them, they're nutritious, delicious and expensive to buy.