The pumpkin is a vegetable, but most pumpkins grown today are sold for decorating and carving. They come in all sizes and shapes, from mini-pumpkins, the size of apples, to giant ones, weighing over 200 pounds. Some pumpkins are gray or pale green, but most are yellow or orange. Some are even white.

Pumpkin flowers are large and yellow. Some kinds of pumpkins are grown for cattle to eat. Cucumbers, squash, melons and gourds are all related to the great pumpkin.

The pumpkin is one of only a few foods we still eat today that is native to North America. American Indians used them as food and medicine. Dried pumpkin shells served as bowls or containers for storing grains and seeds. The Indians also flattened strips of pumpkins, dried them and made mats from them.

Pumpkins were a main part of the Pilgrims’ daily diet because they would keep for several months, if left uncut and stored in a cool, dry place. Colonists made pumpkin pies by slicing off pumpkin tops, removing the seeds, filling the insides with milk, spices and honey, then baking it all in hot ashes. The Pilgrims’ dependence on pumpkins is reflected in this poem, from 1630. (Notice the old English “undoon” for “undone,” or finished.)

For pottage and puddings and custards and pies,
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies,
We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon,
If it were not for pumpkins we should be undoon.

The tradition of carving pumpkins at Halloween started with the Irish, but the original jack-o-lanterns were made from turnips. When the Irish immigrated to the U.S., they found pumpkins a plenty, and they were much easier to carve than turnips.

The pumpkin is a member of the cucurbit family. Some of the world’s largest fruits are pumpkins. Pumpkins range in size from less than a pound to over 1,000 pounds. According to Cucurbits, the official newsletter of the World Pumpkin Confederation, a 2005 record-breaking pumpkin weighed in at 1,469 pounds, and a giant squash tipped the scales at just over 962 pounds (436 kg).

The town of Roffstown, New Hampshire, holds an annual pumpkin regatta each October, in which giant pumpkins are hollowed out to make room for a single passenger, then fitted with trolling motors and paraded on the Piscataquog River.