

Talking Pumpkins

There is just something about pumpkins in Autumn. That's why we try to include a little about them at our Fall Fruit and Vegetable Seminar & Trade Show. The winter squash soup was the best, knowing more about insect pests they get helpful...and then there are those Giant Pumpkins!

We were pleased to have Jim Beauchemin, 2005 NH Giant Pumpkin Growing Champion, weighing in at 1314 lbs, tell us some of his secrets, all mixed in with a good bit of humor. Pumpkin Regatta?... we've got to work on a Coös County entry in 2012! Jim also pointed out their practical, marketing aspects; essentially that there's nothing like a giant pumpkin in front of your business to draw in customers. A drive down Main Street, Lancaster illustrates that.

All this big pumpkin excitement goes back, I'd say to Howard Dill and his pioneering work with Atlantic Giant Pumpkins. I had the good fortune to meet Howard one summer while on a family vacation that took us up through the Canadian Maritimes. His farm in Nova Scotia was shown on a town's tourist information map, so off we went.

We parked our car in a small lot nearby a likely looking building - there were big pumpkin signs all over it as I recall - and walked out to take a look. I hailed a tall, lanky person in a battered baseball cap, sure enough it was Howard Dill himself! My first impression was of a scholarly farmer, pleased to welcome visitors and genuinely amazed at being famous. A spark would appear in his clear blue eyes whenever he talked about either pumpkins or sports, particularly hockey.

A section of the main barn was a combination office and Giant Pumpkin Hall of Fame. It was filled with bookshelves, pumpkin paintings & photos, seed racks, sports memorabilia, awards & trophies, with a desk tossed in somewhere. I felt right at home. Numerous news-clippings (one with his picture in the Wall Street Journal) and lots of fan mail were also on display. I remember seeing cards from Eddie Albert of "Green Acres" renown for those of you old enough. Don't recall any from Hank Kimball, County Ag-Agent.

Being early summer we had a walk about his pumpkin patch. Scattered across the field were numerous sorts of dog-house frames covered with shade cloth. Inside each was one pumpkin plant that was just starting to lift, but not running yet. Soon they would fill all the open spaces in between. Have a picture somewhere.

As you may guess I came away with all kinds of giant pumpkin secrets. Many are contained in his book "The Pumpkin King". An autographed, treasured copy resides on my bookshelf. Here's one secret I will relate: At that time women were winning most of the giant pumpkin contests so Howard convinced a relative to plant one for him. Her

pumpkin turned out to be the best of all! So, he advised, be sure my wife or one of my daughters “give it a pat” when we plant the seeds he gave us.

A continued, long history is predicted for all pumpkins. They’ve certainly come a long way from their use as a food staple during Colonial times. Words from a Pilgrim song give an indication: “We have pumpkin at morning, and pumpkin at noon, if it were not for pumpkin, we would be undoon”

Something like 1.8 Billion pounds of pumpkins were being grown in the US at the beginning of the millennium. A lot of that demand is linked to the Halloween, Jack O’ Lanterns, and the decoration market that stretches on to Thanksgiving. Plant breeders are also adding to their appeal with better flavored winter squash (close relatives), shorter growing season and disease resistant cultivars.

My three giant pumpkins are now on display in the front yard. I attribute their small size to those two hailstorms we experienced, **but next year** I’ll be sure to have my wife “Give Them a Pat”.