

# Pumpkin People

I'VE WANTED CONTROL over my own food production ever since I learned at the age of eight that you're supposed to wash apples, not because of bug poo, but because of poisonous pesticides. I also suffered from a vague form of survivalist's discomfort, a sense of accelerating toward a wall along a path that people loosely referred to as "unsustainability." The Smith and Hawken's gardening catalog played a role with its depiction of the wholesomely elegant foodie digging with her hand-forged English garden fork, just a bit of dirt under her nails. Barry and I explained to family and friends that our organic homestead would allow us to grow food with vastly better flavor and nourishment.

We had created gardens at every house we had ever rented but had no experience in larger-scale food production. So when I wrapped up my legal work in Seattle before Barry wrapped up his tech work, I applied to the Linnaea Farm Organic Gardening Programme on Cortes Island. The application charmed me with such questions as "What is your favorite vegetable and why?"

"Among many beautiful and delicious vegetables," I wrote, "few grow to stupendous size. For this, I admire the pumpkin most of all."

I could have gone on about its celebrity status in children's literature: Linus's Great Pumpkin who rewards sincerity, an under sung virtue; or Cinderella's sparkly pumpkin carriage drawn by four white horses. What girl doesn't want a ride in that coach? Or Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, who had a wife and couldn't keep her. In retrospect, what a creep. But he did manage to grow a pumpkin big enough to hold an adult. I couldn't even grow a pumpkin that would fit my two-year-old niece, although I came pretty close. Instead I carved it into a huge jack-o'-lantern, an admirably ubiquitous folk art.

The pumpkin I grew during organic gardening school weighted well over 100 pounds. Someone suggested that I present it to the Pumpkin People who competed each year to grow the biggest pumpkin on the island. Although I didn't follow through, I expected that these people, the Pumpkin People, would someday be my people.

Gary was the first Pumpkin Person I met. He has always lived on Cortes and rarely leaves. He fishes, digs clams, hunts, gathers and then brings his abundance to his friends with a big, easy smile and clear blue eyes. He explained to me that someone named Serge gave him a pumpkin seedling every spring. Serge started all the seeds on the exact same day under the exact same conditions so that all the contestants would be at the same starting line. Then he delivered them to the other Pumpkin People and let them select their seedling on the same day.

After that, the race was on. All season long, the Pumpkin People urged their seedlings with ingredients that tended to favor those who did manual labor in the sea or on farms, such as seaweed, the starfish that oyster farmers cleaned off their rafts and various kinds of animal manure. In the fall, according to Gary, the pumpkins were ceremonially weighed by Serge,

who drove around in his truck with a giant scale. Then the contestants had a victory feast of food from the forest, sea and garden.

For three years straight, I asked Gary if I could have a seedling.

“Sure,” he’d say. “I’ll talk to Serge.”

But even with Gary’s help, I never made it onto Serge’s list. It gradually dawned on me that it might have to do with my role as a director of the Cortes Ecoforestry Society, which opposed industrial logging on the island’s Crown and timber company lands. Our success meant that tree fellers like Serge had small jobs or had to go off-island to work. Still, I felt the arena of big vegetables should be a meritocracy, unsullied by politics. In a former life, I had competed with reasonable success: good schools, academic scholarships and interesting jobs. As an islander, I danced like a heathen at parties and, like the other Pumpkin People, spent a huge amount of my time in the garden. How could I be disallowed from the pumpkin in-crowd? They were romantic and fascinating. I wanted in.

One year, at Gary’s recommendation, we hired Serge to fell some big hemlocks next to our house. Serge has a rosy round face with bright, quick eyes. He is not so tall, with a curly beard and a ponytail. The day he felled our trees, he wore a grey wool undershirt stretched over his firm, round belly.

“When I am working for the timber companies,” he told me, “I ride from one big clear-cut to another in the bucket of a helicopter with my chain saw. The cut blocks are so large; it is too far to walk.”

After he had landed the hemlocks with surgical precision, I asked him for a big pumpkin seedling.

“Yes, Gary said you wanted this,” he said with a roguish smile, “I will see what I can do.”

I waited for that seedling all spring. We cleared the garden beds, started transplants in the greenhouse and planted peas. We ate rich, green nettles from an abandoned homestead cooked with eggs and feta cheese. Orange and red salmonberries from the roadside satisfied our winter hunger for bright fruit. As spring progressed, the alders along the driveway turned misty red with new buds, and the blackberry vines sprouted shoots of pure green vigor. We transplanted broccoli, lettuce and onions. But Serge never delivered a pumpkin seedling. When I saw Gary at a potluck in the early summer, he showed polite surprise that Serge hadn't included me.

"He must have forgotten," Gary said. "My pumpkin plant is growing really well this year."

After his pumpkin won, he showed me the certificate he received, a 5 × 7 card hand-painted by a Pumpkin Person artist: a beautiful orange pumpkin on a vibrant blue background. A banner stretched above the pumpkin with Gary's name, the weight of his pumpkin and the year. Gary described the chanterelle pie someone had brought to the feast. I realized the truth that he was too kind to state: I would never be invited into the Pumpkin People, regardless of my shared passion for enormous vegetables. I would have to prove myself, in some incontrovertible manner.

The next winter, I went online to order seeds from big pumpkins.com and, while I was at it, a book on how to grow huge pumpkins. For weeks, I put the manure from our pet horse Goldie in a pile on the driveway, near the hose for easy watering.

In early June, Gary dropped off his daughter to play with my son and mentioned that he had transplanted his seedling from Serge outside. As the children ran down to the strawberry bed, I took him to the greenhouse to see my seedling. The leaves were the size of dessert plates. After Gary left, I

transplanted it into the six-foot pile of manure. I patted down a hollow at the base of the vine, so water would soak in.

In late June, when the sugar snap peas were the size of my ring finger, I placed the hose in the hollow and turned it on as I hiked down the hill to pick peas. A half hour later, when I returned with my big metal bowl full of sweet, crunchy sugar snaps, I turned the hose off again. By the time the sprouting broccoli waved its hundred purple scepters throughout the garden, the pumpkin had 15 leaves the size of dinner plates.

Gary came tromping up the drive in his gumboots with a bucket of prawns. I watched him through the kitchen window as he stopped in front of the pumpkin plant and stared.

"That's a big pumpkin plant," he said when he came in the door. "It's bigger than any of Serge's."

I smiled and offered him snap peas from the bowl.

The next day, I noticed the alder leaves were big enough to sway and rustle in the cool breeze. I buried the prawn shells in the pumpkin manure pile on my way to the lower garden to transplant a confetti of lettuce starts: green and red colors, smooth and frilly textures. On the way back up to the house, I noticed the big pumpkin had opened its first yellow flower to show an orange waxy pistil inside.

All through July, I knelt in the sawdust path and peeked under the leaves of the raspberry bushes. We nudged the berries off their cores into the yogurt containers that hung from our necks with orange baling twine. By that time, the big pumpkin plant had runners that I had to train along the side of the driveway to keep it clear, and several pale yellow fruits.

In late July, the yellow plums came ripe and squirted sweet water when we bit into the taut, tart skins. By then, two of the baby pumpkins had rotted, but the third one was swelling up. The pumpkin leaves were so rampant that I couldn't get to the base of the plant without stepping on them. I tiptoed through

them and plunged a 4-inch PVC pipe into the manure pile. I stuck the hose in the pipe and kept a trickle of water running into the mound toward the roots.

My mom came to visit. When I picked her up from the float plane, she wore all white, like the yachties who cruise into Cortes Bay on boats worth ten times the amount of a Cortes homestead. I had lost track of time weeding the garden and hadn't changed from my baggy, stained, long-sleeved shirt and ripped canvas pants. I dragged her crisp red rolling suitcase down the dusty driveway lined with alders and blackberries. She stopped at the giant pumpkin plant and stared.

"Now, tell me what's going on here," she said.

I explained about the tightly knit Pumpkin People and my attempt to break in with a huge pumpkin. She stared silently at the lumpy mass. Perhaps she was thinking about all those university tuition bills she had paid. Then she said, "Well, aren't you clever," and walked on.

For the first two weeks of August, we ate entire dinners of green beans, sometimes steamed and drizzled with garlic butter, sometimes sautéed in hot chili oil with tofu or sausage. I cooked the first zucchini in butter until it was mellow and sweet. When we passed through the greenhouse, we stripped Concord grapes from their clusters for a sweet-tart mouthful. Meanwhile, the pumpkin grew. When Gary came to dinner with his family, he looked it over and shook his head.

One day in August, the angle of the beach-ball-sized pumpkin seemed different. I waded through the sea of leaves and looked down at the base of the vine: the weight of the pumpkin had snapped it. I felt sick. My outsized ambition to be a Pumpkin Person had required all the time and nutrients I had to spare. If this pumpkin died, I would never be able to match my level of effort again, and I would never be a Pumpkin Person.

I knelt down to view the damage. The vine still held with fibers along the bottom. I walked up to the house and found the pumpkin-growing book in a stack of seed catalogs. It stated that some growers intentionally pierce the vine to their largest pumpkin so that they can wick nutrients directly to it. The book advised using milk. No way. I had already used too much of our horse manure for an essentially ornamental purpose.

Instead, I made compost tea from comfrey and chicken manure in a plastic bucket and put a piece of string from the bucket into the broken pumpkin vine to create a nutrient wick. I threw a handful of weeds or a spade full of horse manure into the compost tea bucket when I passed by each morning on my way to fill my basket with our small, dense orange-red peaches that we ate with blackberries on our porridge.

The pumpkin swelled like a water balloon. By the time we dug the potatoes in late August, I could see the pale orange blob from the deck as I shucked the starchy Indian corn that we prefer.

In early September, the Irish Peach apples came ripe. We plowed tortilla chips into big bowls full of home-grown tomatoes, cilantro, garlic and onions. The pumpkin got bigger and uglier. One day, as I sat on the deck and wove the tops of storage onions around baling twine to hang in the root cellar, I heard a truck pull in at the gate. Gary walked up the drive with some cartons full of eggs from the world's happiest hens. He stopped at the pumpkin plant and stared. He scratched his head.

When he reached the deck, he said, "That's the biggest pumpkin I've ever seen. Serge says he wants to have a look."

"He's welcome to stop by," I said.

In late September, I had to step around the pumpkin vines to climb the plum tree. I squeezed my bare feet into the crooks of branches and reached for the pendulous fruit. I made plum

cake with caramelized brown sugar at the bottom of the pan. We found the first chanterelles in the forest and the Prince mushroom in a hollow near the beach for wild mushroom pie.

Gary came back with a boatload of sockeye salmon so we went to the public dock with garbage bags and bought enough for the year. We cut the fish into fillets and steaks on the big stone table in the yard while the wasps flew around our hands. The fish broth from the heads became stock for paella with clams we dug from the lagoon. I dumped some boiled fish heads in the pumpkin's compost tea and returned the bones and clam shells to the sea. We bought half a lamb from a friend. The freezer was stuffed with fish, meat, raspberries and peaches.

We admired our beautiful Bartlett pears and sautéed pear slices in butter. We walked around the orchard and tasted the fruit from our young trees: flavor of almonds in one, the scent of perfume in another. Their names filled our tongues: Gravenstein Teal Crimson, Orenco, Chisel Jersey, Aromatic Russet.

Barry climbed the chestnut trees out back and shook them. We sat on the deck in leather gloves and pulled the shiny brown nuts from their spine cases with forks. I lay in the afternoon sun to read a romance novel and eat a bowl of apples.

It rained, and the pumpkin swelled to almost the size of an easy chair. We set the winter squash on boards in the field to keep them off the wet soil while their skins hardened. Beans dried on a sheet on the greenhouse floor. In the evenings, we shelled and sorted them by color: black, white, red, gold and speckled.

We fed apple mash into the old-style Italian grape press that went crk CRK crk CRK as the gear pressed down the wooden slabs that squeezed the mash. We put canning jars under the spout of the press and drank sun-sugared sweetness.

In early-October, we collected more wild mushrooms. The boletes showed up at the foot of ferny cliffs, and pine



mushrooms humped up the moss beside old Douglas firs. The kids made forts in the trees while the adults rambled by with baskets. After a windstorm, we drove the truck to the shore, placed a plank as a ramp, and wheelbarrowed seaweed from the windrows piled up on the cobble beach. Serge was there with his big white diesel truck.

"This seaweed is very good for pumpkins," he said. "Gary tells me you have a big pumpkin."

"Yes, I do," I said.

"I would like to see this pumpkin."

"Come by any time."

"I will come with my scale to weigh it."

"Good," I said. "It is very ugly."

"That is what Gary told me," Serge said.

When I got home, I put a handful of seaweed in the compost tea. The rest we laid on the garden beds. A few days later, I covered the seaweed with alder leaves raked from a road behind our house. I heard Serge's diesel truck drive up to the gate and went to meet him.

Serge jumped out of the cab with a friend. He looked at my gigantic, misshapen pumpkin and whistled.

"She's a big one," he said, "but ugly."

He sent me off to find plywood so that he could roll the pumpkin on to the scale. He took the big digital scale out of his truck bed. The three of us strained to roll the huge pumpkin up the plywood on to the scale. Nothing registered. We rolled it back down.

Serge stepped on to the scale to test it: 198 pounds.

"I am not too fat," he commented, "I am just too short. I'm supposed to be six foot six."

We rolled the pumpkin back up the ramp. No read out. We rolled the pumpkin off. Serge's friend climbed on: 178 pounds.

"Yes, the scale, it works," said Serge.

We rolled the pumpkin back on, slowly, and watched as it went up to 298 pounds and then blinked off.

“It is too big for the scale!” Serge exclaimed. “The scale stops at three hundred pounds. Your pumpkin weighs more than three hundred pounds!”

He shook his head, truly impressed. “My biggest pumpkin was 276 pounds,” he said. “You have won for sure.”

He gave me a congratulatory hug and kiss. A zing passed from his soft red lips onto mine. We exchanged a startled glance.

“Maybe people will pay to guess the weight, and the money will go to the new medical clinic,” Serge said as he gazed across the field. “The medical clinic is not political.”

“Everyone needs health care,” I agreed looking at the garden, some beds full of kale and leeks and others covered with leaves.

“The deer like the pumpkin meat, so do the sheep,” Serge said. “You can put your pumpkin in the bush after we weigh it. I will call you tomorrow about the winner’s banquet, maybe hot dogs at Smelt Bay.”

That night, we ate dinner at the house of our friends Jane and Raphael. Jane is tall and quiet. Raphael pulls people into his streams of enthusiasm. They had butchered three lambs earlier that day, and we cooked little pieces of fresh organ meat in fondue pots full of water with thyme: heart, kidney, liver and lung. For dessert, Jane served a thin white cake rolled up with raspberries and cream. As she cut into it, the phone rang. Serge had tracked me down.

“There is *another* pumpkin that tops the scale,” he said. He sounded very happy. “I don’t know if you have won. Marc’s pumpkin is too big for the scale.”

“It is a good looking pumpkin,” he added. “It is in the community hall if you want to see it. Bring a flashlight to shine through the window.”

“I will bring my pumpkin to the community hall so we can compare them side by side,” I said.

“Your pumpkin is too big to move,” Serge said.

“How did Marc’s pumpkin get to the community hall?”

“We rolled it up a ramp,” Serge said.

We sat around Jane and Raphael’s dinner table and analyzed the situation. It didn’t look good.

Marc, like Serge, is French Canadian. He had lived on the island a long time. I was an American. I had lived on the island for as long as Marc. I had been a Canadian citizen for years, but that could never change the facts. I was an American.

Marc had used a proper Pumpkin Person seedling, saved from a previous year’s winner and hand-delivered to him by Serge. I had ordered mine online from [bigpumpkins.com](http://bigpumpkins.com).

Marc did manual work. I did manual work as well, but I had once practiced law in the US which made me a lawyer and, of course, an American.

Marc didn’t serve on any community boards that I knew of, and he was generous within the community, like Serge. I was a director of the Ecoforestry Society, which was very political. My husband and I were generous with community environmental efforts, and this too was political.

Marc presumably fed his pumpkin with seaweed, fish guts and starfish, in the same manner that Serge and Gary and all the other Pumpkin People fed theirs. I fed my pumpkin with the manure of a pet horse and wicked compost tea into the vine, as suggested in a book.

Last but not least, Marc went to last year’s Halloween dance dressed as Serge. He grew a short, curly beard for the occasion and wore a tight sweater over a fake belly. He beamed, winked and waved. He won first prize. I went as a tree.

We decided that, given the facts, I had to get my pumpkin to the hall for a side-by-side comparison. In the heat of our

search for justice, we decided to go get my pumpkin then and there. But it was dark and cold outside.

“We’ll do it tomorrow,” Raphael said. “The hall is locked at night.”

My family drove by the hall on the way home and shone a headlamp through the window. There was Marc’s pumpkin, big, round and orange. I lifted my six-year-old son up so he could see it too.

“Sweet pumpkin,” he said.

The next day, I found Raphael and some other friends at a sustainability fair at the hall. We went to get my pumpkin. I parked my old green truck next to the vine on the drive and found a fish net in the barn. We rolled the pumpkin onto the net and, to Raphael’s count, strained to lift it up into the truck bed. The fish net bulged, but held. I drove slowly back to the hall where people moved aside to make room for our fish net stretcher bearing the pale, slumping hulk. We set it down next to Marc’s firm, round, bright orange pumpkin. My pumpkin looked like a GMO monster that could attack his pretty vegetable. Around me, people murmured how ugly it was.

“You’re proud of it, I can tell,” a friend accused me.

“No. I am embarrassed,” I said. “If any factor other than weight and size can be considered in the contest, it will lose. It should lose. All I want is a seedling next year.”

“It is a weight and size contest,” my friend pointed out. “Yours will win.”

I gave a resigned shrug, then felt a smile creep across my face.

The next day, I filled my truck with gas at Squirrel Cove, and Serge drove up in his big white truck.

“Did you see my pumpkin at the hall?” I asked.

“Yes, I saw it,” he said. “We are going to use the pumpkins

to raise money for the health clinic. People will pay to guess which weighs more.”

I waited.

“The health clinic is not political,” he reminded me with a smile. “Then we will have hot dogs at Smelt Bay.”

“That sounds good,” I said.

“We will have to cut the pumpkins up to weigh them,” Serge said. “They probably lose about 25 pounds a week inside the hall. They are drying out.”

The next weekend Jane, Raphael, Barry and I went camping on a nearby island. The pumpkins still had not been weighed. As we walked through the deep forest, we talked about how the big pumpkin contest rules could be bent to favor a certain contestant. They could use a chain saw to cut the pumpkins up for weighing and move the saw around more in one pumpkin than another so that it would lose more weight in the cut. They could wait to weigh them because a larger pumpkin had a greater surface area and would dehydrate more quickly.

When we got home from camping, there was a message from Serge on the answering machine.

“It is about the big pumpkin,” he said. “It is leaking in the hall and rotting onto the floor. They want it out of there. We have to cut it up and weigh it very soon. By the way, we made \$207 for the health clinic. Call me to talk about the pumpkin.”

I called him, and we decided to meet at the hall the next day to cut my pumpkin up and weigh it.

“I will have to use a chain saw,” Serge said.

My sister, a geology professor, called that night. She had just made a big round soccer ball costume for her daughter for Halloween, and she felt very proud.

“My whole life has been preparing me for this,” she said. “The home economics courses, the science of crystalline structures.”

I told her about Serge and my big pumpkin. We paid tribute to the seminal influence of a big round pumpkin costume our mom had made for our brother long ago. Perhaps it inspired both my big pumpkin growing obsession and my sister's soccer ball costume that, if orange, would be a pumpkin.

"I think your whole life has been preparing you for this big pumpkin contest," she said. "The gardening, the lawyering."

"The pumpkin is disgustingly ugly," I replied, "but I will do my best to have it fairly weighed."

"Be careful," she cautioned. "These things can start a grudge that lasts generations."

Then Raphael called and offered to come to the hall the next morning in case I needed help.

The next morning, I packed up towels, two kitchen knives and a digital camera. Serge had a wheelbarrow, a shovel, a pruning saw and a carpenter's saw. No chain saw.

My ugly pumpkin had leaked beige goo on the hall floor. It also had big dark spots of rot all over it. We hoped that we could get it out of the hall without it collapsing. Two respected gardeners, Frank and Peggy, showed up with a clipboard. It was a mail day, and a lot of people walked by. They shook their heads, some in wonderment, most in disgust.

"I heard she force fed it," someone whispered.

"That's no pumpkin," someone else said. "That's a squash."

This was true. Bigpumpkins.com in fact sells Atlantic Giant squashes, which resemble, but are not, true pumpkins.

Frank took a picture of Serge and me by the pumpkin, smiling with our arms around each other.

"Lucky you brought it to the hall early," Serge commented. "We generally don't accept rotting pumpkins."

Then he drove home for a piece of plastic to roll the pumpkin on to, to contain the mess.

Once we got the pumpkin on to the plastic, we scooched it outside. The pumpkin held. I cleaned up the trail of beige liquid with a mop from the janitor's closet. By the time I came outside, Serge had sawed several chunks out of the pumpkin. Inside was a sea of orange-brown goop and big seeds. Frank scooped some seeds into a cup to plant the next year.

"I don't think we should weigh the liquid," said Serge. "Just the pumpkin meat."

"The liquid is inside the pumpkin," I protested. "If we hadn't cut it open, it would count."

"But how do we weigh it?" Serge asked.

Peggy took a trash can from the hall and emptied it. After weighing the trash can, we scooped the goop into it, first with a small bucket and then with the shovel, and weighed it again. Serge sawed off chunks of pumpkin, and we weighed those. Peggy wrote down the weight of each piece. Raphael arrived and grinned, his hands in his pockets. People stopped to observe.

"A classic Cortes moment," someone commented, as Serge hacked at the remaining pumpkin mess with his shovel.

When it was over, Peggy added up the chunk and liquid weights: 312.7 pounds.

"We'd better weigh Marc's too," Frank said. "It has brown spots on it. It might not last much longer."

"The scale won't weigh it," Serge said. "And I cannot cut up the pumpkin without Marc here."

"Let's try it whole," said Frank. "It looks smaller."

We rolled Marc's pumpkin onto the scale: 212.4 pounds. Serge shook his head in amazement.

"I don't understand it," he said. "The last time, it broke the scale."

Raphael winked at me.

We wheeled the gooey innards of my pumpkin into the alder grove behind the hall for the deer. The chunks went into Frank's truck for his sheep.

"They are used to better food, I think," Serge observed. "I will call you about the victory party. I think we will enjoy our hot dogs," he said. He winked at me as we left the hall.

We didn't eat hot dogs at Smelt Bay. Serge rented the hall for the best feast I had ever attended: wild venison, sockeye salmon, apple juice, winter squash, apple pie, potatoes, chanterelles and every other good thing that can be found on the island in late October. I brought a salad of chopped kale with feta cheese, dried cranberries, toasted walnuts and a garlicky balsamic vinaigrette dressing. I spent my prize money on a bottle of Scotch and found a tugboat captain who reminded me of my oldest brother to share it with. I reminded him of his wife's sister, and before long, we felt like family. The rest of the money went to the health center. I received a beautiful hand-painted certificate with the year and the weight of the pumpkin.

I had a speech prepared that acknowledged the different seed source, the unorthodox wick method of fertilization, the terrible appearance of my pumpkin and the way it leaked on the hall floor. The speech ended with a formal request for a Pumpkin Person seedling. But the Pumpkin People's feast was rowdy and informal, and for a moment, I recognized something overweening in my intense desire to belong there. Instead, we toasted big pumpkins.

Serge asked me to order him seeds from [bigpumpkin.com](http://bigpumpkin.com), so I did. The next spring, as I tugged at rotting stumps of kale that were as thick as my wrists, I heard his diesel truck come down our lane. It turned left at the Y, into our neighbor's driveway. I stopped working and listened to them talk about pumpkin seedlings. Then the truck door slammed and the engine



started. I stood, feet in the mud, waiting. Sure enough, the truck turned at the Y and headed up our drive. I threw down my gloves and ran up to the gate to meet Serge and receive my pumpkin seedling. Every year since then, we have grown Atlantic Giant squashes, not pumpkins, and I have not won, but I have feasted.