



# The Pumpkin Prince

By Marie Oliver

Is it science? Is it art? Is it an addiction? Perhaps trying to grow the world's largest pumpkin is a bit of all three.

"Once you get bit by the bug, it becomes an obsession," says Kirk Mombert, a champion giant pumpkin grower from Harrisburg.

Kirk's self-proclaimed addiction to pumpkin growing began in about 1979, when the Eugene Register-Guard newspaper sponsored a pumpkin-growing contest.

For the first couple of years, Kirk came in second in the contest. He was growing Big Moon pumpkins that weighed an average of 100 pounds, and he was happy. But then his competitive spirit rose, and second place was no longer good

## *Champion pumpkin grower says seeds are the key*

enough. After reading more about cultivating techniques, he began to win the local contest.

Then someone told him about Howard Dill's Atlantic Giant Pumpkin seeds—and life has not been the same for Kirk, or his family, since.

As Kirk continued to plant, the obsession took root along with the pumpkins.

When Kirk started growing big pumpkins, he was one of only a handful of growers on the West Coast. Each season, he took his pumpkins to Vancouver, Canada,

and Half Moon Bay, California, for the "weigh-offs." Competing raised the stakes—and his drive to win.

Now several competitions are on the West Coast. Kirk is a charter member of the Pacific Northwest Giant Pumpkin Growers group, which sponsors weigh-offs, holds seed auctions and seminars and produces a newsletter for members.

"The more I got into worldwide competition, the more I had to learn to get them bigger," says Kirk.

Seeds from a pumpkin Kirk grew in 1992 spawned some of the biggest pumpkins in the world during the next five or six years.

"The seed became famous, and everybody wanted it," Kirk says. "It grew a lot of 800- to 900-pound pumpkins back then."

At that time, 800 to 900 pounds

was a record-setting size. The genes from that pumpkin are in most of the seeds that produce today's biggest pumpkins, Kirk says.

But the bar keeps rising as giant pumpkin growers genetically engineer larger and larger specimens.

In 1979, the world record pumpkin weighed 451 pounds. Today, the record is 1,385 pounds, set in 2003 by Steve Deletas from Pleasant Hill. Kirk's personal best is the 1,173-pound pumpkin he grew in 2002.

At \$5 per pound in prize money, it is easy to see why Kirk works so hard at it.

He says the most important thing in growing pumpkins is the seed.

"Like a racehorse, you have to have good genetics," he says.

Still, there is the luck of the draw, because not all seeds from record-setting pumpkins have the same potential.

"One theory is that there's a handful of silver bullet seeds in every pumpkin," he says.

Kirk says a proven seed will go for \$250 to \$350 on an Internet auction.

"It's amazing what people will pay for the proven seeds," he says. "I think the record is \$600 for one pumpkin seed."

Once established like Kirk, it is easy to get seeds for free. It is common for growers to trade seeds among themselves.

When Kirk started growing giant pumpkins, he says it was difficult to find information. He learned by trial and error. It is not the same for new growers today.

"There's so much information sharing now, anybody can be up and going in a year or two," says Kirk.

Kirk refines his growing techniques each year. Getting ready for the growing season begins in the fall, with ground preparation.

Last fall, Kirk added to the soil a mixture of chicken and dairy cattle manure to increase humus content, and mint compost and lime to adjust the pH levels.

During the growing season, he added a mix of molasses, liquid seaweed and powdered fish to the



*Above, after a weigh-off, Kirk sells his pumpkins to Scott Cully, a professional pumpkin carver from Medford, who turns them into works of art. Opposite page, Kirk with his 1,173-pound record-setting pumpkin in 2002.*

water. This fertilizer mix goes into the soil and on the foliage.

"In the last two or three years, competitive growers have almost completely stopped using commercial fertilizers," Kirk says.

He covers the plants to protect them from wind damage and cool nights. As the plant grows, he systematically prunes to control where the plant's energy goes.

Between July 1 and July 10, Kirk hand-pollinates to control the genetics for the next generation. He has to be ready on the one morning of the year the flower opens to be pollinated.

He pollinates eight to 10 plants on a vine, then watches the fruit carefully, taking measurements and cutting off slow-growing ones.

"Then one day, you have to make a decision," he says. "And sometimes that's tough to leave that one pumpkin on the plant."

Whichever plant Kirk chooses will get his most tender-loving care.

Most of the growth occurs during two weeks in mid-August.

"Some of them will grow 26 pounds in one day," says Kirk.

About 60 percent of the growth occurs at night, when the pumpkin

doesn't have to put all of its energy into cooling.

Kirk says people who are successful pay attention to detail and work hard. But even with the best of intentions, something can always go wrong.

"I have nightmares two or three times per season," he says, noting his biggest fear is finding that all of the pumpkins have split. "Everything will be fine, then you go out there one morning and a small split will start in the stem, and they just get bigger and bigger. Sometimes they'll stop, and sometimes they'll split clear to the cavity."

Kirk just retired from 29 years as a firefighter. He is thinking he may retire from pumpkin growing, but he also knows addictions are not easy to break.

"I'm saying that," he says with a smile. "We'll see!" ■

*For more information, contact the Pacific Northwest Giant Pumpkin Growers at P.O. Box 187, Mossyrock, WA 98564, or visit its Web site at [www.backyardgardener.com/rem.htm](http://www.backyardgardener.com/rem.htm).*

Following are dates and locations for the 2004 weigh-offs sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Pumpkin Growers:

**Friday, September 10**

Puyallup Fair  
5 p.m., Beef Cattle arena  
Puyallup, Washington

**Saturday, September 25**

The Pumpkin Palace  
Orting, Washington

**Saturday, October 2**

Lee Farms  
21975 SW 65th Ave  
Tualatin, Oregon

**Saturday, October 9**

Central Market  
Shoreline, Washington