

Pumpkins bring vivid life to fading fall landscape

- A brief history of the beloved pumpkin -

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I have to admit I love pumpkins. Not to eat, mind you. When I first tried one, I expected it to taste as flamboyant and strident as its brilliant orange color and outrageous size - tart and acidic, more like grapefruit, say, or even lemons.

Instead, I found it sweet, even cloying, and ever since, at Thanksgiving, I have made a beeline for the apple tart. Perhaps this is why I don't always associate the plant with the food. Pie and cheesecake are the last thing I think about when I see pumpkins brightening a mist fall pasture along Highway 1.

Instead, for me, they are synonymous with autumn, a herald of winter, like the turning leaves. Their orange color fits right in, and yet there is also a wonderful defiance about them. They seem to flout the empty fields in their very profusion, their refusal to let us starve, their confidence and cheerfulness that life will go on.

This is quite unlike the brilliant fading of the leaves, which despite its beauty, is a fading nonetheless. Pumpkins shout harvest, not death; they emphasize the abundance of the season, Keats' "mellow fruitfulness" turned raucous in a last brilliant flash of life and fun before the cold and rain set in.

There are several things I encountered for the first time when I came to America, and pumpkins were one of them. They are, after all, indigenous to this continent, which is why we eat them at Thanksgiving, and even though the first settlers quickly introduced them to Europe, to the best of my knowledge they never really caught on over there.

Charles Perrault, writing his famous version of Cinderella and her pumpkin-turned-carriage at the end of the 17th century, clearly knew about them. But I was surprised, upon reflection, that he made them seem so commonplace, even sending Cinderella out to pick one from the garden, as though pumpkins were as run of the mill as Brussels sprouts and cauliflower. Of course, this could have been due to the exigencies of the story line (the pumpkin, after all, had to come from somewhere). In the end, though, perhaps it was mere fancy that led Perrault to choose as he did.

There is definitely something in the slight ribbing of the pumpkin's outer skin, its golden color and oval shape, that is reminiscent of a royal carriage. Whatever the case, how much better it works than the Grimm Brothers' story, where Cinderella just opens the kitchen door and the carriage magically appears, as if from thin air.

And then there are jack o'lanterns. As far as I can gather, this tradition originated in Ireland, as part of the Celtic harvest festival, which, poetically enough, was celebrated at the same time as the passing of the old year and the coming of the new.

The veil separating the living from the dead was thought to be at its thinnest at this time, allowing spirits, good and evil, to dart back and forth, joining in, or spoiling, the festivities, according to their predilection. The early Christians, not surprisingly, were reluctant to give up on this annual bout of necromancy, forcing Pope Gregory III to change the date of All Saints Day, the closest match available, to coincide with the ancient celebration.

New twists and turns were added over the years, one of which concerned an evil old drunk called Jack who made a deal with the devil that he would never go to hell. Unfortunately for him, St. Peter would not let him into heaven either, condemning him to wander forever in the darkness between the two worlds. To light his way, Satan tossed him a burning ember (how odd that Satan should be so helpful), which Jack placed in a carved-out turnip.

The Irish brought this tradition with them to America, where, over time, turnips were discarded for pumpkins, and a new tradition was born. A good one, too. Pumpkins, after all, are larger, more colorful, and oh so much easier to carve.

Finally, what about the pumpkin as a term of endearment? My dog is large and male, a mutt, hated by rottweilers and other alpha types, who see him as a threat. He has a very masculine-sounding name, entirely appropriate to his size and breeding, and yet, for reasons neither my daughter nor I can remember, we call him Pumpkin. How could we? Even our little white cat recognizes the word. When she hears it, her favorite game is to scurry off and corner him, hiding behind a table leg from where she can bounce out to swat his tail. And our ferocious-looking, but, in truth, very gentle beast, only too aware that he is about to be ambushed, just stands there looking miserable until we make the cat go away.

My daughter says he's hard on the outside, mushy on the inside, just like a pumpkin, so perhaps that's where both his nickname and the term spring from.

Who knows? And who knows why these odd, round, plump, funny-looking plants should have ended up with such a wondrous history, evocative not only for our most private affections but also for so many of our ancient myths, traditions and fairy tales. Perhaps they grow to record size because that's the only way they can gain the attention of a world that takes their bewitching orange presence so much for granted.