Pumpkin Play

Overview: Pumpkins are an abundant resource in the fall for the classroom, community, and at-home activities. Here are a few great ways to incorporate pumpkins into your garden learning.

Materials: Varies by Activity

Time to Complete: Varies by Activity	**Location:** Indoor or Outdoor
Ages: 3 to 12	**Season:** Late Summer/ Fall

Background Information: Whether for jack-o'-lantern carving, decorating, or baking into pies, October is pumpkin time! Gardeners wait eagerly all season long to harvest this quintessential fall crop, beginning in early summer when seeds are tucked into warm soil, through the summer months as the vines run and the fruits begin to size up, and finally on into fall when the large pumpkins are ready to pick at last. How we treasure this colorful bounty! And pumpkins deliver great nutrition as well as good eating. Their sweet flesh is loaded with the healthful antioxidant beta-carotene, along with fiber, Vitamin C, and other nutrients. Pumpkins originated in what is today Mexico and are one of the oldest domesticated crops, with evidence of cultivation more than seven thousand years ago.

Learn more about growing your own pumpkins by reading our **Pumpkin Growing Guide**: https://kidsgardening.org/resources/growing-guide-pumpkins/

Instructions:

Float your Pumpkin Boat

Pumpkins can grow to enormous sizes! The record for the world's heaviest pumpkin, 2,703 lbs., was established in Italy in 2021. But no matter the size, all pumpkins float thanks to their low density. At the West Coast Giant Pumpkin Regatta, an annual event in Tualatin, Oregon, people race across a lake in boats made of 1,000+ pound pumpkins!

Using pumpkins to discuss weight versus density can be a fun physics investigation with kids. Weigh something dense like a river stone, and then weigh a pumpkin larger than the stone. Discuss why a larger object is not always heavier due to density. Have kids guess if the stone and pumpkin will sink or float in water. Using a water table, sink, bath, or container filled with water, conduct a sink or float test. Explain that things denser than water sink, and those less dense, like pumpkins, float!

Take your investigation one step further by turning your pumpkin into a boat! Carefully cut a large circle around the stem of the pumpkin, remove the top, and scoop out the insides (saving your seeds for later, see below). Toothpicks, wooden skewers, or chopsticks with paper attached make for great pumpkin sails. Kids can have fun designing and decorating their sails, and then experiment with how much weight their boat can hold before it goes under the surface. If you have a body of water nearby, you could even set your pumpkin boats out to sail!

Save your Seeds

Pumpkin seeds, also known as pepitas, are edible, tasty, and very useful!

NOTE: *Kids all have different sensory cups, and while scooping the seeds out of a pumpkin might be slimy sensory fun for some, it can also cause others to feel anxious or overwhelmed. Allow them to engage at their own level.*

- **Roast them:** Separate the seeds from the stringy pulp, making sure to wash them well. Spread the seeds out on a cookie sheet and sprinkle lightly with salt or other spices if desired. Toast them for 3 or 4 minutes at 375 degrees, stir, and toast another 2 or 3 minutes until they're evenly golden. Cool them to room temperature, and enjoy! Roasted seeds can be eaten as a crunchy snack on their own or added to salads, soups, baked goods, cereals, and more.
- **Count them:** Pumpkin seeds can be a wonderful seasonal element for math lessons. Have kids guess how many seeds a pumpkin holds and then work together to harvest and count them all. Washed and dried seeds can be great for counting or arithmetic exercises.
- **Sprout them:** Easy and quick to sprout, pumpkin seeds are a great option for seed sprouting observation activities.

Pumpkin Potions

Foster imaginative play by setting up a pumpkin potion-making station. Scooped-out pumpkins can transform into cauldrons, stew pots, volcanoes, lab beakers, and more. Provide kids with an emptied pumpkin, something to stir with, vinegar, and a variety of "ingredients" that fit your theme. Allow kids to concoct their potion in the pumpkin, and then let them sprinkle baking soda into the potion to watch the exciting reaction that results.

Tips: Adding food coloring to your vinegar adds a visual element of fun, and putting vinegar into slow-pour vessels like condiment containers or narrow-necked bottles helps to prolong the fun for kids who like to pour everything in right away. Scented ingredients like dried lavender, cinnamon sticks, and cloves add another sensory element to the activity. Having kids collect their own "ingredients" in natural spaces is a great way to encourage observation and focus (and save some money). ***NOTE:*** *This activity can become quite messy, so pick a location that is conducive to messy, creative play.*

Pumpkin Planters

For kids who are eager to plant in the fall, pumpkins can be a fun (albeit temporary) container for gardening:

- Cut the top off the pumpkin and scoop out all seeds and pulp.
- Fill the pumpkin about 1/2 of the way full with pre-moistened potting soil if using nursery plants. Flowers, herbs and even succulents are great in pumpkins.
- Remove plants from their containers, massaging the root balls and placing them in the pumpkin. Then, fill in the space around the plant with more potting soil and give the plant a light watering.
- If using seeds, fill the whole pumpkin with pre-moistened potting soil and sew fast-sprouting seeds like beans, wheat grass, marigolds, nasturtiums… or pumpkins!
- Once the pumpkin begins to fade, plant the whole pumpkin in soil and it will fertilize your plants as it decomposes.