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Oh, My Gourd: Jack-O-Lanterns!

October has many elements that are recognizable. Mums and falling leaves stir that fall spirit. Another hallmark of October is the pumpkin, more specifically, the jack-o'-lantern.

Jack-o-lanterns and pumpkin carving, as a whole, are staples for fall fun. We'll dive into jack-o-lanterns and their history, but first, I'd like to talk about gourds. The origin of this season can be traced back to native Mesoamerican squash. The distinction that most people are familiar with is probably summer and winter squash, but there's more to it.

Gourds, squash, pumpkins, and even zucchini are closely related: the same plant, in fact. The breakdown of the family tree is lengthy and complex. The important part is knowing that ancient gourd carvings from native populations eventually evolved into the carved pumpkins associated with Halloween.

While the plant originated from around Mexico and Central America, it spread across the hemisphere. The history of carving fruits for tools and containers far predates costumes and candy. When colonists brought their holidays, the fruit was a great fit for jack-o-lanterns.

Cutting open a pumpkin, scooping out the insides, and placing a candle inside is a pretty common routine these days. Back in the 1800's it was a means of warding away evil spirits. The tale of Stingy Jack follows a wicked man whose soul was condemned to wander the earth. He carried a candle inside a turnip to light his way, earning the moniker of Jack of the Lantern. People then made their own lanterns to ward off his spirit and other wicked creatures.

Today, people tend to use tealights and pumpkins, rather than candles and turnips. To prolong the life of the jack-o-lantern, it's important to combat decay. A cut-up fruit is obviously going to start rotting, but it's made worse with heat and moisture. Using a battery-powered light and keeping the pumpkin in a cool, dry part of the porch will help. Also, consider sanitizing the cut pumpkin with a 10% bleach solution after cutting it.

As an alternative to slicing a fruit, you can always paint pumpkins and have a much longer-lived decoration. Whatever way you get into the fall spirit, it likely involves a pumpkin!

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