

The Parkers' Pumpkin Patch

Tad Parker and his wife, Kendree, of Durham, New Hampshire, are fairly weighted down when it comes to raising giant pumpkins—literally! “The first thing you need to know”, Kendree explained, “is that you can’t talk about giant pumpkins without having an enormous smile on your face because it’s a very silly hobby.”

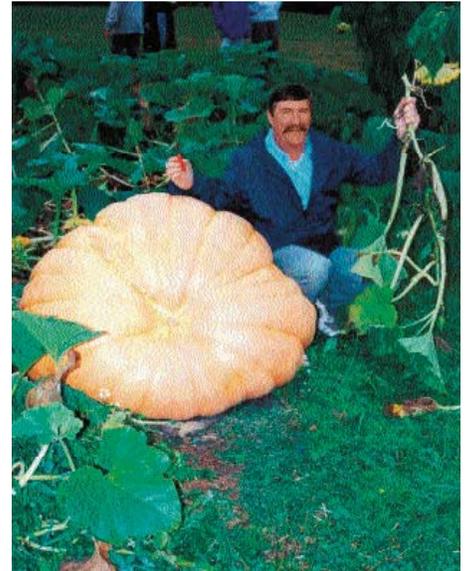
The Parkers got involved with giant pumpkins in 1999 after a friend asserted that he could grow pumpkins as large as those at the Topsfield Fair, north of Boston, Massachusetts. The Parkers held their friend to the task and offered to help him. “He was running a big horse farm at the time and I said, ‘You’ve got plenty of fields, let’s till them up and I’ll help you’”, Kendree recalled.

“So, we got a couple of books, and I realized there was a lot more to this than just tilling the ground”, Kendree said. “It became not sort of a joke but, ‘Wow! This is really interesting! Do you think we can do this?’”

Tad remarked, “No one actually starts out with the aspiration of being a giant pumpkin grower.” He noted that he is a printer by trade.

“I grew up in the printing business. My great-grandparents started a printing business at the turn of the century [1900s] in Vermont, so I’ve grown up with printer’s ink in my blood”, Tad said. He became more familiar with the editing side when he joined what was then the Council of Biology Editors in 1983. “We were printing a lot of biomedical publications at our printing business in Vermont [Capital City Press, now a part of the Sheridan Group], and it was of interest to me what was happening in the process before the materials got to us. I really didn’t have much knowledge about the editing process and review process, and how science became published.”

Tad now is based at Odyssey Press, in New Hampshire. He explained: “Odyssey Press is a digital/ultrashort-run printing business I started [in 1989] with my partner, Doug Stone.” Stone was killed September 11, 2001, in the crash of American Airlines flight 11 into the World



Tad Parker and giant pumpkin.

Trade Center. Afterward Parker, who had been vice president of journal sales for the Sheridan Group for 3 years, resigned from Sheridan to devote his energies full time to Odyssey Press.

Over the years Tad has been active in CBE and CSE. He was CSE president in 2000-2001. Previously he served on the Board of Directors and various Council committees and task forces. He now chairs the Awards and Honors Committee.

Tad deferred to Kendree when it came to discussing the pumpkins. “She is a master gardener with credentials from the University of New Hampshire”, he said. “What Tad isn’t probably going to admit to”, joked Kendree, “is that we are members of the New England Pumpkin Growers Association. In fact, we are also members of the New Hampshire Giant Pumpkin Growers Association.” “This is a closely guarded secret”, Tad added with a grin.

Kendree explained the science behind their hobby: “The seed, which is actually as big as the top joint of your thumb, can grow if you have the right combination of genetics, science, and soil.” Each giant pumpkin seed can produce vines and leaves covering 3000 square feet, yield 30 to 40 pumpkins, consume 25 gallons of water a day, and have leaves, the Parkers explained, the size of an elephant’s ear. “But obviously, if you

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are growing for competition, you have to decide which ones you are going to keep.” Toward the end of the growing season, as competition time approaches (July into August), the pumpkins can gain 20 to 30 pounds a day. “The winning pumpkin last year at the Topsfield Fair weighed 1260 pounds”, Kendree said. “At the time we started, no one had broken 1000 pounds.”

“The goal is to beat your last year’s best-sized pumpkin”, Tad added. The Parkers’ first pumpkin, in 1999, weighed in at 285 pounds. In 2000, their pumpkin weighed 353 pounds; in 2001, it weighed 532 pounds. It takes an average of 12 to 16 people to position the pumpkin in the truck for its ride to the official weigh-in the night before the fair, the Parkers said.

“Giant pumpkin growing is considered a sport”, Kendree said, “although not by me.” She added, “The commercial value is actually in the genetic composition of the seeds. If you’ve got [a pumpkin] that weighs in really well, it’s cosmetically a pretty color or shape, or people like the way it looks, they will clamor for your seeds.” The seeds sell for \$2.50 to \$4.00 each, and one pumpkin produces 300 to 700 seeds. The season for growing giant pumpkins spans April to October. Tad added another month to their season because “you have the whole month of October to get rid of your pumpkins!”

“If you don’t get rid of them quickly enough”, Kendree explained, “and they ‘go down’, which in the jargon of giant pump-

kin translates as rots, it gets messy. They rot really fast, and the stench is unbelievable because of the liquid fertilizer used to stimulate growth. Not even the deer will eat them!”

Kendree said she has tried to entice local college students into lifting the giant pumpkin from her pickup truck, but none have attempted the feat to date. The Parkers have donated pumpkins to day-care centers and a children’s museum, which in turn have harvested the seeds and reproduced the giant pumpkins. “The joy, if you’re going to share the fun—which I think is one of the great things about growing giants—is . . . experiencing the magic of having a garden produced by children”, Kendree said. “Children love pumpkins.”

The Parkers hope to grow a pumpkin big enough to enter into an annual pumpkin regatta. “We’re running out of teenage boys to carry the pumpkins around”, Tad joked. The regatta features giant pumpkins, generally weighing over 700 pounds, that are carved out to accommodate an adult sailor. Proceeds from the giant pumpkin regatta go to a philanthropic cause, Kendree said.

For more about giant pumpkins, see www.bigpumpkins.com.

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