

LEVELED BOOK • Q

Jack-o'-Lanterns

**Multi
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Focus Question

How did the tradition of carving jack-o'-lanterns begin, and how have jack-o'-lanterns changed over time?



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People carve pumpkins into all sorts of creative designs.

What Is a Jack-o'-Lantern?

Some of them look spooky. Some of them look funny. Some of them look like detailed works of art. Who would have guessed that so much could be done with pumpkins?

Carved pumpkins are called *jack-o'-lanterns*. A **festive** sight on doorsteps, porches, and in windows, jack-o'-lanterns are popular decorations around Halloween. When a light is placed inside the pumpkin's hollow center, the jack-o'-lantern glows in the autumn night.



Some artists compete to carve the best jack-o'-lanterns and even the largest.

Children and adults alike enjoy turning pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns. Simple jack-o'-lanterns may have triangle eyes and a toothy grin. Other jack-o'-lanterns are carved with frightening faces. Some artists carve out detailed and festive **designs**.

People started carving pumpkins more than a hundred years ago. Legends say the jack-o'-lantern **tradition** began even earlier, though, in Ireland. People in Ireland carved their jack-o'-lanterns out of turnips or potatoes.

Why did the Irish start this tradition, and where did the name jack-o'-lantern come from, anyway? Many fables exist about its origins. One of the more commonly known fables from the nineteenth century tells of a man named **Stingy Jack**.

The legend says that Stingy Jack was cheap, which is how he earned his nickname. He also liked to play tricks on everyone. Stingy Jack was so **mischievous** that when he died, he was **cursed** to roam the land forever. He had to spend eternity alone in the darkness. He carved a turnip and put a light inside to guide him. The Irish called his ghost “Jack of the Lantern” and then simply “Jack-o'-lantern.”





This turnip was carved into a traditional jack-o'-lantern.

Modern Jack-o'-Lanterns

Eventually, the Stingy Jack tradition became part of a night called All Hallows' Eve. People throughout Europe lit bonfires and wore costumes to ward off roaming ghosts. In Ireland, people hollowed out turnips and potatoes and carved scary faces on the vegetables. They placed a light inside to keep mischievous spirits like Stingy Jack away from their homes. These were the original jack-o'-lanterns.

Soon, people in Scotland and England started to follow the custom of carving vegetables on this night. The English used hollowed-out beets for their jack-o'-lanterns. All Hallows' Eve later became known as Halloween.

When Irish, English, and Scottish people **immigrated** to the United States, they brought the jack-o'-lantern tradition with them. They soon found that pumpkins, grown in the United States, worked well as jack-o'-lanterns. By the 1920s, pumpkin carving became widespread across America.

Today, carving jack-o'-lanterns is an important part of Halloween, just like trick-or-treating and wearing costumes. Every autumn, people visit pumpkin patches, farms, and vegetable stands to pick just the right pumpkin. About 1.5 billion pounds (more than 680 million kg) of pumpkins are grown in the United States each year.

Children enjoy searching through rows of pumpkins to pick out their favorite.





A standard pumpkin carving kit includes a thin saw, a scoop, and a stencil tracer.

Carving Jack-o'-Lanterns

Pumpkins that are firm, smooth, and free of marks work well for jack-o'-lanterns. A pumpkin that will stay upright is the safer choice. If it tilts to one side, the light placed inside may not be stable.

Some people buy carving kits, which include tools and art patterns to make a great jack-o'-lantern. Other pumpkin carvers use their own tools and designs, or even carve freehand.

The first step in carving a pumpkin is to cut a hole in the top. This forms the lid. Always have a parent help out while carving with a knife.



Step 1: Cut off the top.

Next, the inside flesh and the seeds can be scooped out until the pumpkin is clean and hollow. Many people roast the pumpkin seeds for a healthy snack. People also use the pumpkin flesh to make tasty pies, breads, and soups. No part of the pumpkin need go to waste.



Step 2: Scoop out the insides.

The next step is to draw a design on the pumpkin. When the design is finished, it's time to carve.

People can carve faces, animals, designs, or a message. They can also use **stencils** or even paint to decorate the pumpkin. Every jack-o'-lantern is a special creation.

After the pumpkin is carved, a candle or other light can be placed inside and the pumpkin lid can go back on top. It's best to display a jack-o'-lantern within a few days of carving. After a few days, the pumpkin may spoil and lose shape.



Jack-o'-Lantern Events

Many cities host jack-o'-lantern festivals to display their artistic pumpkins. Some of the pumpkins feature traditional scary faces. Creative carvers have also fashioned cartoon characters, animals, and other detailed designs.

In Hudson Valley, New York, thousands of jack-o'-lanterns make up a special display. This festive event features sound effects and music. Hundreds of pumpkins lie side by side to form snakes, dinosaurs, and even a pumpkin **planetarium**.



The Great Jack-o'-Lantern Blaze is held in Hudson Valley, New York. It takes place in Sleepy Hollow, home to the legend of the Headless Horseman.



Professional artists and sculptors hand-carve more than five thousand pumpkins each year for the Rise of the Jack-o'-Lanterns event in Los Angeles.

A massive display in Los Angeles, California, showcases pumpkin cars, dinosaurs, and carvings of sports, television, and movie stars. People can watch as the artists carve their pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns.



Giant Jack-o'-Lantern

An artist carves one of the largest jack-o'-lanterns ever recorded. It weighed more than 1,800 pounds (816 kg)! The record-breaking pumpkin was as heavy as a cow. The artist beat his own Guinness World Record for largest jack-o'-lantern, which he had earned five years earlier.



Keene's annual Pumpkin Festival set the world record for most lit jack-o'-lanterns many times.

Recently, the town of Keene, New Hampshire, broke a world record for the most lit jack-o'-lanterns on display. The town boasted a whopping thirty thousand lit jack-o'-lanterns!

Halloween Under the Sea



Carved pumpkins are even displayed underwater. Some aquarium workers put carved pumpkins in large ocean tanks each autumn. No one knows what the fish think, but visitors enjoy the festive sight.



Carving a jack-o'-lantern can take time, but the end result is worth the effort.

The Tradition Continues

Carving pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns is a fun activity for people of all ages.

Pumpkins can be carved with a scary face or detailed artwork, or be used as part of a larger display. However people carve them, jack-o'-lanterns are a sure sign that Halloween is around the corner. Jack-o'-lantern designs are only limited by the carver's imagination. What kind of jack-o'-lantern would you make?

Glossary

cursed (<i>v.</i>)	called upon a supernatural power to cause trouble or harm to someone (p. 6)
designs (<i>n.</i>)	patterns of lines, shapes, images, or colors (p. 5)
festive (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to a celebration or holiday; cheerful (p. 4)
immigrated (<i>v.</i>)	moved from one country into another with the intention of settling there (p. 8)
mischievous (<i>adj.</i>)	liking to cause trouble in a playful way (p. 6)
planetarium (<i>n.</i>)	a building in which the image of the night sky is projected onto a curved ceiling (p. 12)
stingy (<i>adj.</i>)	not liking or willing to spend, give, or share (p. 6)
stencils (<i>n.</i>)	thin sheets of a stiff material with designs or letters cut out of them, used for marking the cut designs on a surface (p. 11)
tradition (<i>n.</i>)	a belief or custom that is passed down from year to year and generation to generation (p. 5)

Words to Know

cursed	planetarium
designs	stingy
festive	stencils
immigrated	tradition
mischievous	

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Connections

Writing and Art

How would you carve your jack-o'-lantern for Halloween? Draw a picture of your design and write about it.

Social Studies

Research another country's Halloween traditions. Use a Venn diagram to compare your country's Halloween traditions with the traditions of the other country.

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