

**Go large**  
Ian Neale  
with his prize  
winning veg at  
the Harrogate  
Flower Show  
in 2018

It's a world in which giant tomatoes are tenderly cradled in old bras and pampered pumpkins are wrapped in duvets at night. The UK's top giant vegetable growers reveal what it takes to cultivate colossal crops

# Size matters

**A**ugust is a tense time of year in the world of giant vegetable growing. With a month to go until the national championships, the would-be winners are diligently nursing their marrows, carrots and swedes. These last weeks are full of potential, but also of worry. At any point, a promising pumpkin could crack, a star squash could rot, and hopes could be dashed. Plus, there's no way of knowing the competition that lies elsewhere, expanding in secret on a plot miles away.

'I've thought, "This is a winner" with no doubt at all,' says Graham Barratt, 65, an experienced grower from Gloucester. 'Then one of my mates will turn up, pull down the side of his wagon, and reveal an absolute monster. It's hilarious. You'd cry if you didn't laugh.' Last year, he placed second for longest cucumber (1.032 metres) and longest chilli (42.2 cm).

The championships will be held in Worcestershire at Malvern Autumn Show from 27-29 September. More than 100 growers are expected to enter about 30 categories, from heaviest squash, leek and radish to longest parsnip, beetroot and runner bean. This year, there is a special prize of £1,000 for the heaviest cantaloupe melon. While a win would reward months of work, some growers are aiming higher. Adjudicators from Guinness World Records attend to check out the vegetables shooting for global, not just national, dominance. In 2023 eight Guinness World Records were broken, including longest broad bean pod (43.1cm) and heaviest cucumber (13.388kg).

With this capacity for both disappointment and hard-won glory, it's no surprise that the field is ripe for filmmaking. In April, mockumentary *Swede Caroline* premiered, spotlighting the competitive world of mega marrow-growing. Graham supplied some giant vegetables as props and was featured as an extra. Another upcoming release about a pumpkin contest, *Grow*, stars Nick Frost, Jane Horrocks, Golda Rosheuvel and Alan Carr, and is set to hit cinemas in 2025.

Growing enormous vegetables takes commitment, patience, and a dose of luck. 'It's us against nature,' says Ian Neale, 81, who lives near Newport, Wales.

**by**  
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He has been growing colossal crops for 40 years and was the first person in the world to nurture a 100lb swede. Last year, he won two categories at Malvern (heaviest celery and swede) and he was once invited backstage by rapper Snoop Dogg, a fan of Ian's work. To achieve this level of success, he spends up to 50 hours a week tending to his vegetables. 'You've got to live on the job,' he says. He thinks growers who travel to an allotment are at a disadvantage, unable to quickly respond to the whims of the weather.

For these are veg that demand attention. Michele Thomas, 59, grows pumpkins so huge that a friend would like to hollow one out and try to use it as a boat. A headteacher from Pembrokeshire, she is up by 5am to spend time in the garden before work. 'It is certainly a pampered pumpkin,' she says, referring to her latest project. 'Cover goes on, cover comes off. Dust it down. Put a fan on it.' When the championships roll around, a neighbour with a tractor helps to lift the pumpkin out of the ground and into the van she bought especially.

**'I don't know what I'd be doing if I wasn't growing giant vegetables'**

**Make it big**  
Graham  
Barratt and  
his winning  
longest  
cucumber  
measuring  
92cm; Michele  
Thomas (left)  
with one of her  
giant pumpkins

There is plenty to do. An active community dispenses collective knowledge on social media, ranging from best fertilisers to creative hacks. 'Old bras are handy to use as a cradle for your giant tomatoes,' says Graham. He has also used his wife's old tights to strap up his cucumbers (their heft can snap the stem if they don't have support) and on cold evenings he'll wrap his pumpkins in a duvet. 'You need a king-size,' he says.

But there are some things you can't control. Like a duck claiming your marrow patch. 'It

ANDREW MCCAREN/LNP/SHUTTERSTOCK







☛ flew up and scared the living daylight out of me,' says Graham. 'There's a nest of about ten eggs. I'll have to let that take its course before planting any marrows.'

Peter Glazebrook, 79, from Nottinghamshire, is legendary in the growing world. The retired building surveyor currently holds five world records: heaviest potato, aubergine, cauliflower, bell pepper, and longest runner bean. He explains how most serious growers keep their vegetables undercover – in a polytunnel or greenhouse – to regulate the climate. Even then, no one is immune to catastrophe. 'They can grow away for months and then suddenly die on you,' he says, solemnly.

This is a high-maintenance hobby, and the prize money is meagre – rarely more than £100 if you win and as low as £5 for sixth place. 'It costs far more than that to grow them,' says Peter, whose expenses can run into the thousands. So why do it? 'I like the challenge of all the variables and the fact that no two years are the same,' says Graham. He says it's all worth it when the growers unite at Malvern to compare notes while sipping cider on a haystack. For others, it provides something to do, to work towards. 'It stops me sitting in a chair feeling sorry for myself,' says Ian. Peter agrees. 'I've been retired for 18 years, and it's kept me going, kept me interested, kept me fit,' he says. 'I don't know what I'd be doing if I wasn't growing giant vegetables.'

But before hotly contested world records, before the bras and the tights and the duvets, there was Mike Fortey. It was the early Eighties, and a friendly contest between Mike and a mate swelled into the UK's first giant vegetable competition. At a pub in South Wales, the inaugural pumpkin championships attracted 20 hopefuls. The winner weighed around 100lbs. Within two years, entries were so large they couldn't fit through the pub door. Today,



#### **Veggie might**

**From top:**  
Peter Glazebrook with his onion weighing 18lbs 1oz; the first giant veg competition; Mike and Kevin Fortey



**Send us a photo of your giant veg!**  
Email us at [editor@saga.co.uk](mailto:editor@saga.co.uk) with Veg in the subject line

record-breaking pumpkins can exceed 2,500lbs – that's about as heavy as a rhinoceros.

Mike also set up a national pumpkin society, producing newsletters on a typewriter while his young son, Kevin, was on hand with the Tipp-Ex. Kevin Fortey has since inherited this role of pumpkin preacher, or giant veg gosseller. He spreads the word through a popular Facebook group, Giant Vegetable Community, with over 6,000 members worldwide sharing tips and tricks.

The Welsh pub has been demolished, but the giant vegetable movement lives on. 'I put that down to my dad, who set the scene,' says Kevin, known as Mr Giant Veg. 'It's on the rise globally now.' He explains how, historically, the hobby has attracted retirees, due to the time it requires. 'But it's becoming more intergenerational,' he says. 'My dad used to say, "Don't let your secrets go to the grave."' Still, he estimates that around 60% of growers are over 50.

What about the rumours of misconduct? 'Skulduggery has been known to happen,' says Graham, who has had two bell peppers swiped at the national championships, perpetrator unknown. He can only assume it was the same person and that they were after the seeds. 'I would have given them some if they had asked,' he says. There are stories of people deliberately gifting duff seeds. Kevin says a machine was brought in at one competition to detect water in pumpkins, injected to make them seem heavier. 'They're only cheating themselves,' he says. Sabotage, though, is uncommon. 'When I was growing up, you'd have people slashing polytunnels and ripping up leeks,' says Kevin. 'But you don't hear that any more.'

There are also occasional disputes with competition results. 'The vegetable is supposed to be in a condition where it could be eaten,' says Graham. 'If it's got a seed head on it, or a crack, it should be disqualified. But there's been instances where it's been awarded a prize regardless. Then people spot things the judge didn't. That can cause issues.' Animosity between some growers can last for years.

After the championships, the pumpkins are often used as Halloween decorations. The onions and tomatoes are fine to eat, but many giant vegetables taste rotten. Some go to soup kitchens, some are fed to farm animals. The best are harvested for the seeds that will yield next year's oversized offering; Kevin says their ancestry often goes back to his father's early efforts. Graham organises an exchange where both seasoned and new growers get access to world-class seed. Then it all begins again. ☛