

Final Copy

A not-so-small miracle occurs late October at the New York Botanical Gardens. A harvest of three humongous pumpkins, each one thousands of pounds, appear at the front of the conservatory as if out of thin air. Everyone, young and old, took in the scene with the same gleeful disbelief. How can these be real?

The NYBG's Giant Pumpkin weekend is an annual fall event that should not be missed (and cannot be missed from afar). The event is hosted in collaboration with the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth, a worldwide organization of expert pumpkin growers, and has been a tradition since 2011. This year, three pumpkins earned the title as some of the country's largest pumpkins, if not the world. They were on display all week until November 1.

Pumpkins are without a doubt the most loved symbols of the season, and these are endowed with all the more to love. I took an hour-long subway ride and paid \$25 admission to get a glimpse for myself. Each was glorified atop a wooden crate as yellow leaves decorated the plaza in autumnal confetti. The largest pumpkin, grown by Barry LeBlanc in New Hampshire, earned the first place crate that was taller than the others. It weighed precisely 2,268 lbs.

"Growing these things is literally a full time job, in addition to my full time job," LeBlanc said. LeBlanc is awake as early as 4:30 am to tend to the giant pumpkin that he grows in his 4,000 sq. ft. backyard garden. A common misconception is that professional farmers grow the pumpkins, when it's more of a hobby for regular folk with regular jobs, LeBlanc said. More like a mad scientist experiment than anything else, to me.

LeBlanc says that he somewhat cheats mother nature in order to conceive a giant pumpkin. Starting with the right seeds, genetically cultivated over decades, is the first step toward glory. Then, the goal is to prolong the growing season for as long as possible. LeBlanc constructs a temporary, heated greenhouse to begin growing the pumpkin in late March, which gives the pumpkin a month-long headstart from the traditional start of the growing season in late May. Note, the giant pumpkin is cultivated to be the sole pumpkin on a single vine, so it reaps all of the rewards of the daily watering and fertilizing.

From there, the pumpkin grows by tens of pounds per day and hundreds of pounds per week until it reaches its final form around the end of September. After around-the-clock, intensive care, it's easy to imagine becoming attached.

"Oh, you do, I'll tell ya," LeBlanc said. But does he go so far as to name them?

"No, a lot of growers do. I'm not that corny," LeBlanc said.

I couldn't help but think this was a choice to avoid becoming *too* attached, should the pumpkin become destined for a greater life, as this year's has. While the growers are usually invited to New York on an expense-paid trip to witness their pumpkins in their glory, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the trip was cancelled this year, and LeBlanc and his wife did not attend in person. LeBlanc asked me if they did a good job with the display; he sounded like a proud parent forced to miss his kid's recital. I sent him a few pictures I had snapped, and assured him the pumpkins were a hit. His pumpkin was the 6th largest in the world this year.

Each of the pumpkins exude particular personalities. The smallest, grown by Steve Sperry, is a palish orange and green. It's smoother than the others and lays flatter, as if deflating in its third-place status.

The second-largest, grown by Joe Jutras, is the most misshapen and palest in color, which gave it a more understated grandeur than the others.

The largest, of course, is certainly the most kingly. LeBlanc's pumpkin sported the most vibrant shade of orange of the three and, having been set back on its pedestal behind the other two, basked in humble victory.

Dozens of people crowded round to take selfies in front of the pumpkins this opening weekend, engorged in their disbelief. Many attempted to snap pictures akin to those tourists take at the Leaning Tower of Pisa, as if propping up the pumpkins on their shoulders. Others were less sure of the monstrous squashes.

"Come on, smile! Look nice!" One man said to a boy who stood nervously in front of the camera. The pumpkins loomed over his head. Another man with graying hair chimed in with encouragement from a nearby bench.

"Not feeling it, right? I know, I get it. Let me give you a lesson. Pretend you're enjoying it," said he, with a laugh. Pictures were taken, but the advice was definitely not.

Once the initial shock and awe wore off, event goers wondered about the logistics.

"How do you do it? How long does it take? What determines whether it comes out that size or that size?" One woman thought out loud. She pointed to the smaller pumpkins that decorated the base of the display. The pumpkins do have a logic-defying quality to them, as if Cinderella's fairy godmother *bibbidi-bobbidi-booed* them into existence herself.

In reality, each of the pumpkins made significant journeys to reach the NYBG, the largest from New Hampshire, the other two (that weighed in at 2,031.5 lbs and 2,021.5 lbs, respectively) originated in Rhode Island. Most of the pumpkins are grown on top of a piece of plywood or a tarp to prepare for easier lifting when the time comes, usually via industrial forklift or tractor or similar machinery. Then, they are loaded onto a capable trailer and driven to their destination. What a sight that would be!

“It’s pretty cool when you get all the attention on the highway. Everyone hangs out the window and takes pictures, giving us the thumbs up,” LeBlanc said. A representative from LeBlanc’s local pumpkin growing chapter did the honor this year.

The pumpkins are also hollowed to harvest their valuable seeds before they are put on display.

“Growers all over the world share these seeds, there’s giant pumpkin clubs all over the world,” LeBlanc said. Growers bid on the seeds each year during winter auctions for often hundreds of dollars a pop. Sometimes, a single seed can sell for as high as \$1,000, LeBlanc says. This year, LeBlanc chose to donate his seeds.

When the weekend is over, the pumpkins will be composted on the garden grounds. Next year, they will miraculously come back to life, bringing the joy of the season with them.

The misconception is that farmers grow them, but backyard gardens grow them.

Not like you grow acres and acres of pumpkins and you get 1 huge ones, there's so much work.

All about the genetics of the seeds

Super super healthy soil and growing conditions

Summer season, after first frost around Memorial Day until late September. We put up temporary green houses, grow end of march beginning of april, a month before...heated green houses. Idea is by the time the last frost comes, you've already got this pretty big plant going.

Cheated mother nature by a month or so.

You grow one plant, 30 x 40 huge vine about as thick as your arm. You basically grow one pumpkin on that entire plant.

Fertilize them every day.

3 plants, those three plants took up 12-1300 square feet.

4,000 square feet

Started on June 21, July 11 size of beach ball, July 20 500 lbs...in a 20 day period. it grew 1,000 pounds in 20 days. By the time it was 40 days old, it weighed over 1500 pounds. End of August, 2,000 pounds. End of September, grew over 200 pounds.

End of May, come out of the green houses. End of June, you pollinate (size of a walnut) 10 days (size of basketball) 20 days (size of a beach ball) maybe 100-150 pounds. Between 20-30 days, 40 pounds a day.

2268, 6th largest one in the world this year.

3 other ones that were bigger in Europe...

2 brothers grow in a green house in UK, almost 2600 pounds. Biggest one in the world was grown in Europe this year.

Big pumpkins.com - it is basically the world governing GPC. Go to weigh-offs, this year. You can see them all there.

World record is 2,624 pounds.

Growers all over the world share these seeds, there's giant pumpkin clubs all over the world. All these clubs have auctions in the winter, all the top growers, people reach out to you for their seeds.

Gone for as much as \$1,000 for one seed. Typical around \$100, couple hundred.

Most of the growers grow them on the garden on a piece of plywood or mats that are slippery so that mice can't chew up under them, and it keeps bugs away and dry.

Too big to fit in a pick up truck, like tractors and heavy equipment to put them on a trailer.

It's pretty cool when you get all the attention on the highway. Everyone hangs out the window, and takes pictures, giving us the thumbs up.

Drove all the way from Wisco, 2100 miles on a trailer to HMB. He won 16 or 17,000.

I've had people all over the world texting me and emailing me about my pumpkin.

They take the seeds out, donate the pumpkin? He took it. Cut the end off, then plug it back up. He is going to give the seeds back.

A lot of years they have professional carvers.

Raincheck

Representative

Deerfield Fair, cancelled this year. Member of the NH club owns a big garden center. Had the fair way off there, so all the pumpkins were weighed, it stayed there until. He had a forklift.

Oh, you do, I'll tell ya. Like most years, how it works is you have the official weigh-offs.

Rinky-dink local pumpkin festivals, then you take your pumpkins and kind of clean up. This year all the stuff was cancelled.

Usually every weekend for 5 weekends in a row. One weekend in a row.

Growing these things is literally a full time job, in addition to my full time.

4:30 AM for a couple hours before work, our there again after work. It's a major, major investment of time. Then all the sudden it's over.”

No, a lot of growers do, I'm not that corny.

This is like a hobby. There's a lot of professional people that do this as hobby. People grow them in their backyard. The biggest misconception is that “farmers” do this type of growing. I have friends who are doctors, etc.