

## Jack O Lantern Story



*Pumpkin Patch at the Outdoor Education Center*

The most popular vegetable during October is the bright orange squash, pumpkin (*Cucurbita maxima*, or *C. moschata*). There is even a “world’s largest pumpkin” contest, with an attractive cash prize. This popularity is not because people have suddenly decided to make pumpkin pies or have mashed squash for dinner.

We all know that the reason pumpkins fetch such a good price during this month is because so many of us are carving jack-o-lanterns, either for fright or delight. Although it

is possible to see much more ornate carvings than the traditional scary face, all of them start with a pumpkin.

How did this come to pass? Why would people cut a vegetable into a ghastly head with a candle burning within?

Curiously, the practice started in a place where pumpkins were unknown. Ireland is the source of many stories, some of which were transformed when they arrived in the United States. The following is the tale of the beginning of the jack-o-lantern.

Once, there was a terrible man named Jack. He lived in a rural part of Ireland where good neighbors were essential. This was not something Jack cared about; he was mean and miserable to all who were unfortunate to come in contact with him. This uncharitable, foul-mouthed lout went about making people who were already struggling even more wretched, for his entire life.

After his long and terrible time on earth, he died and had to face his maker. When Jack reached the pearly gates, the celestial authority looked at his dreadful record and, not surprisingly, reached the conclusion that there was only one thing to do with this character, and sent him to the devil.

At first, the devil was happy to see yet another denizen of his domain. Jack would be a perfect fit, he thought. Jack arrived and was the same horrible individual that he had been while on earth, or worse. He was so terrible that the rest of the local residents began to complain to the devil, saying that this character was simply too awful, even for them!

Here was a situation that the devil had not dealt with before. Could someone really be worse than the rest of his residents? Apparently Jack was.



Heaven was not going to take him, but he could not remain where he was. After careful consideration, the devil came to a decision, and told Jack that he was being evicted, to roam in eternal darkness, alone. Out Jack went.

After some time, Jack returned to the devil and said that it was impossible for him to continue in total solitary darkness. He was not looking for human company, of course, just a little relief from the darkness.

The devil relented, and gave this accursed character a candle and a turnip (it was probably a rutabaga) for a candle holder. Jack cut a hole in the turnip, stuck in the candle and off he went. On very dark nights, his faint light was visible in the distance, terrifying anyone unlucky enough to see “Jack O’ Lantern”.

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