



*“We could see a conventional mixed farm wasn’t going to work long-term and therefore had to offer something different.”*

RICHARD BOWER

Halloween-related festivities have experienced exponential growth during recent years, with a visit to the local pumpkin patch becoming an annual tradition for many families. *CPM* explores the opportunities this winter squash can offer.

By Janine Adamson

**A**sk a more ‘experienced’ generation about their Halloween memories and at best some may recall donning a black bin liner and a warty plastic nose as part of a homemade costume, accompanied by a spot of apple bobbing and a neighbour begrudgingly offering up their toffee bonbon stash.

Perhaps 31 October involved carving a ghoulish face into a turnip, or in some cases, a last minute baking potato. But one thing’s clear – by today’s standards, the memories of old are rather basic – Halloween has become big business.

When you dig into the history of the day, it was celebrated in Ireland and Scotland

for centuries, making its way over to North America in the 1800s. The tradition of pumpkin carving (making jack-o’-lanterns) originates from an Irish folk tale about a chap called ‘Stingy Jack’ – turnips were carved to ward off evil spirits.

Having taken off in America where the turnips were switched to pumpkins, Halloween quickly became a global festivity with engagement rocketing ever since. In fact last year, UK Halloween spending hit an estimated £775M, and perhaps even more surprising, a quarter of Brits name Halloween as their favourite holiday.

But, it’s only during the past 10-15

years or so that the concept of a pumpkin patch (pick your own pumpkins/PYO) has been on the radar for British families. Even so, the sector has seen exponential



#### Business assessment

As with all new projects, it’s essential that a business assessment is carried out prior to embarking on a PYO pumpkin enterprise, stresses CLA’s John Greenshields.



### Pumpkins per hectare

Hutchinsons' Peter Waldock says growers should aim for between 12,350 and 17,300 plants/ha – the bigger the required pumpkin fruit size, the lower the crop density.

growth during this time, meaning coupled with the wholesale market, around 15M pumpkins are grown annually in the UK.

It's therefore unsurprising that those farmers in a position to do so, have cottoned-on to this popular diversification opportunity, but is the market already saturated? John Greenshields, surveyor for the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), believes not.

"Pumpkin patches continue to represent a profitable enterprise, particularly if it can work in conjunction with other diversification projects such as Halloween-related product sales, food and drink, spooky walks, and then maize mazes, Christmas trees, fruit picking and so on.

"However, as with all new projects, it's essential that a business assessment is carried out prior to embarking on the enterprise," he says.

This includes exploring the local competition, if any, and considering whether there's significant unmet demand to warrant such an enterprise. Then it's a case of calculating the costs including labour, insurance, health and safety plus crop production inputs, before finally calculating a suitable price to charge, adds John.

"There are also additional infrastructure-related costs if the site isn't already engaging in public-facing events, such as toilets, car parking and signage."

For those taking the plunge, growing squashes may be 'frighteningly' new territory, particularly for those accustomed to a combinables-based cropping rotation. However, Hutchinsons' agronomist and technical lead for vegetables, Peter Waldock, has built a wealth of

specialist knowledge having worked with pumpkins for the past 25 years.

He says key to note is crop management all depends on the chosen end market, be that commercial wholesale or PYO. "If you're looking at PYO or farm shop produce, pumpkins are mostly direct drilled around mid-May as they aren't frost hardy. Otherwise, they can be raised as glasshouse seedlings and planted out as plugs; there's also the option to grow through black plastic for weed control, or early planted can be put under fleece.

"Regardless, you're looking at between 12,350 and 17,300 plants/ha – the bigger the required pumpkin fruit size, the lower the crop density," explains Peter.

While planting earlier might feel like the right thing to do, he says waiting for optimal conditions will be beneficial because pumpkins don't fare well in waterlogged soils at the germination stage. This is also important to ensure birds don't predate the seeds or pull out the plants.

He adds that growers should aim for locations on rich, well-drained land which can be kept moist. "RB209 for the base nutrition is a good starting point and then follow up with foliar feeds. It's worth noting that calcium nitrate is often used in the base because pumpkins are prone to blossom end breakdown if there isn't enough calcium available in the fruit."

### WEED CONTROL

As with most niche crops, herbicide options are limited and because of this, a good stale seedbed is a must, urges Peter. "Even when herbicides are used in the programme, they're not that effective against the likes of redshank, pale persica, fat hen and nettles. These weeds pose a significant problem because they can grow above the pumpkin crop and shade.

"Consequently, many growers supplement herbicide use with mechanical weeding methods such as inter-row hoeing."

Disease-wise, pumpkins can be vulnerable to a range of pathogens including powdery mildew, phoma,



### Maximising marketing

Capitalising on digital marketing including social media platforms has helped Richard Bower to elevate Lower Drayton Farm's events business, including PYO pumpkins.

botrytis and fusarium. Although some fungicide options are available, Peter advises checking their registration status before proceeding. "For powdery mildew, wetting agents considerably improve the performance of products if approved for use."

Then, Peter perceives the main insect pest threat at germination to be bean seed fly, which lay eggs near the base of the crop with the larvae feeding on seeds, roots, and stems. And despite many pumpkins only being carved and therefore not perceived as an edible, they mustn't be managed following protocols used in ornamental crops, he stresses.

"As tempting as this is because there are more plant protection product approvals in the ornamental market, pumpkins are being sold to consumers who may assume they're safe to eat should they desire, therefore MRLs must be respected.

"There are also VAT implications when you cross into the ornamental market; ultimately, pumpkins and squashes are edible vegetables."

Given the level of food waste associated with Halloween – WRAP's Love Food Hate Waste campaign states 12.8M pumpkins bought for Halloween each year are likely to be left uneaten – there's been a steady rise in the promotion of their use in culinary scenarios.

From soups and pies to bread and curries, it's hoped that by encouraging



### Charity donations

Lower Drayton Farm works with local food banks and FairShare food redistributors to ensure no pumpkins are wasted.



► their consumption, the rate at which families throw pumpkins away will be reduced. This undoubtedly confirms the importance of Peter's stance regarding managing pumpkins as edible crops.

And while the flavour of individual pumpkin varieties varies considerably, cultivars also have different response times, says Peter. "From drilling to harvest this can be 85-135 days, which of course will be a major consideration given Halloween is a rigid calendar date."

Classic pumpkin varieties include Jack O'Lantern, Munchkin, Rouge Vif d'Etampes and Atlantic Giant. Equally, with consumers always on the hunt for something different, options such as Grey Ghost and Crown Prince offer blueish-grey skins, whereas close relatives, gourds, come in a vast range of colours, sizes and skin finishes.

## LOWER DRAYTON FARM

One grower who's become fully accustomed with offering a plethora of pumpkin options to punters is Richard Bower of Lower Drayton Farm in Staffordshire. With an expected footfall of 25,000 visitors this coming autumn, he plants around 20 varieties for the PYO market.

He says his journey into Halloween festivities began some years ago, although he only started planting his own pumpkins in 2017. "What was less than 1ha back then has now become 12ha for this season.

"We plant the crop as seed at the end of May with the varieties all mixed together. I take the approach of we never want to run out of pumpkins, so this means sowing



### Family business

Ray Bower has been integral in supporting the evolution of Lower Drayton Farm.

## Harvest deliberations

Having successfully grown a crop of pumpkins, leaving the fruit on the vine for as long as possible – the next question is, how to harvest?

According to the CLA's John Greenshields, there are various options. "Although some leave the fruit on the vine, others choose to harvest the pumpkins themselves to negate the public having to do so. The pumpkins are then laid out, usually on straw, in lines for visitors to choose from.

"This can reduce waste, maintain more control and limits individuals from accessing the farmland," he comments.

And rather than use machinery to

do this task, growers often choose to hand-cut the crop to mitigate any impact on the appearance of the pumpkins, says John.

"Equally, if there's frost or extreme weather on the horizon in the lead up to an event, it may be wise to harvest early and store the pumpkins in a dry shed if there's space on the farm.

"But regardless of harvest method, you'll certainly require sufficient numbers of wheelbarrows to cater for those visiting and looking to pick pumpkins," he concludes.

125,000 seeds based on our projected visitor numbers and taking into account a percentage of crop failures," he explains.

Visible directly from the M6, Richard says this has helped to quickly build the family's events business – which includes a soft play barn, café and various other seasonal events – although there remains a substantial commercial aspect to the farm. "We've really capitalised on our location, and as such, have made sure the pumpkin patch is visible as cars pass on the motorway.

"October half term is our busiest time of year but we sell the PYO pumpkin tickets from March onwards. How it works is, the ticket price includes access to the patch and one free pumpkin, which are all left on the vine. By August, we expect to have sold enough tickets to have covered the seed costs," he continues.

Conscious there's always a risk of over-planting, Richard has a plan in place to avoid waste. "Once it's 1 November, no one wants a pumpkin. So, we invite Lions Club volunteers to come and harvest the remainder which are then sent to local food banks and FairShare food redistributors. Finally, we invite a neighbour to bring sheep in to graze the site to ensure nothing's wasted."

According to Richard, the main challenge during the years has proven to be weed control, whereas in the past, he's struggled with ground conditions due to a combination of inclement weather and heavier soils.

"You have to balance visitor experience with practical farming – as such, we find growing pumpkins on our sandier soils

is preferable, mainly because the public are walking those fields throughout October. A patch can soon become inaccessible if the ground isn't right."

Having experienced significant growth since Covid-19, Richard continues to have his target set on being the best in the business, capitalising on digital marketing including social media platforms like Instagram. "Yes we still farm – with around 300ha of owned, tenanted and contracted land plus livestock – but I see us primarily as an events business, and it's that which has turned around our overall profitability.

"It's been an evolution with the pumpkins – we now offer a pumpkin village and carving barn, refreshments, fairground rides, PYO vegetables such as potatoes, sweetcorn and carrots, spooky walks and our staff dress up in Halloween costumes.

"Because we invest in marketing, families travel from as far as Manchester and Liverpool to visit us, and having built a following with the various events and soft play, we employ 70 employees both full-time and seasonal," he adds.

However, none of this would have been possible if it hadn't been for the trust instilled in him by his father Ray, highlights Richard. "We've pushed on by working together – we could see a conventional mixed farm wasn't going to work long-term post-BPS, and therefore we had to offer something different.

"And it doesn't stop there, this year we've planted our first immersive tulip walk – 30,000 bulbs of 20 varieties – which will no doubt bring about its own challenges," he concludes. ●