Pumpkin, that traditional fall staple in the kitchen and Halloween decoration on the front porch, is in trouble this year. We are in the midst of a pumpkin shortage.

Most of our commercially grown pumpkins come from Illinois. In fact, 90 percent comes from an area 90 miles around Peoria, Illinois. Spring rains drowned many of the early plants as well as some of those that were planted in a second round. As a result, the pumpkin crop is down by one-third in Illinois.

Most growers are concentrating on the fresh market, leaving some of the largest canners of pumpkins with a short supply. Libby's, the major producer of canned pumpkin, says it will have enough pumpkin for autumn holidays but its supplies may be limited after Thanksgiving. If I were you, I’d make sure I had all the pumpkin I needed until next year’s harvest in the pantry soon.

Besides the fact that they just taste good, pumpkins are highly nutritious. A serving has 200 percent of the vitamin A we need in a day, 3 grams of fiber, more potassium than a banana and all at the bargain price of only 49 calories.

This year, instead of leaving that jack-o’-lantern on the front porch for a moose's winter treat, take a little while to recycle it to an eatable product. Or, buy the small pie pumpkins from the store to make your own pumpkin for your fall recipes.

There are four ways to cook a pumpkin, but they all start out the same way. Cut the top off and scrape out the seeds and stringy part. Separate the seeds for toasting for a tasty fall treat. Cut the pumpkin into manageable pieces. With a small pumpkin, it may only have to be halved. If you are recycling your jack-o-lantern, be sure to trim off any flesh that was scorched from the candle.

From here you have four methods to cook: baking, boiling, pressure cooking or microwaving.
To bake, place cut pumpkin skin side up in a large roasting pan. Add enough water on the bottom to cover the bottom of the pan. Bake at 350 degrees for about an hour, or until the flesh is soft. To microwave, place the chunks of pumpkin in a glass bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Cook on high for 15 minutes or until soft. It is a good idea to stir pieces or move them around about halfway through the process for even cooking.

A pressure cooker can easily cook pumpkin by putting the chunks in the pot, bring it up to pressure and cook it for five minutes. Let the pressure come down naturally and you’ll have fully cooked pumpkin.

Boiling requires a bit more fuss as you have to trim off the skin and cube it before putting it in boiling water from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the size of the cubes.

When the pumpkin is cooked, let it cool completely. If the skin is still on the pumpkin, simply scrape the cooked pumpkin away from the skin with a spoon. Take out your potato masher and mash up the flesh, or puree with the food processor. This product can be used instead of canned, pureed pumpkin.

Also remember that cooked and mashed butternut squash or sweet potatoes can be used as a substitute for pumpkin in a pinch. In fact, where I was raised, the traditional holiday pie was sweet potato pie, not pumpkin.

After the Halloween festivities this year, be sure to salvage that jack-o’-lantern to ensure that you have enough pumpkin for your holiday pies.

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