

Pumpkin Carving Guide

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If you just want to take a steak knife and hack out your every day pumpkin face, then this article is not for you. We're going to take a look at gourmet pumpkin carving for true Halloween connoisseurs. OK, maybe gourmet is a bit of overkill, but why settle for just another carved pumpkin when you can have a prize-winning jack-o-lantern instead?

Success starts with selecting your design

Before even thinking about buying or picking your Halloween pumpkin from the local pumpkin patch, you need to plan the design. You can take the easy way out and buy ready-made pumpkin stencils, or you can design your own.

There are some great on-line sources for free Halloween stencils that you can download and use, or you can hand sketch it. Here are two great places to grab some nice designs. If you're looking for a really unusual stencil, here's one that will drive you bats!

I'll cover how to transfer the pumpkin stencil to your favorite pumpkin after we take a look at actually selecting the pumpkin.

How to pick the perfect pumpkin

The pumpkin's shape and size will determine what type of patterns and designs you can use. If you are using pumpkin carving stencils then it is essential to purchase a pumpkin that matches the stencil's size requirements.

If you don't plan on using a stencil then make sure that your pumpkin is tall and wide enough for the free-hand design that you have in mind.

Look for a pumpkin that's not too ripe. It should be the right color orange and not have any soft spots or bruises. Look for a sturdy stem and never, ever lift the pumpkin by the stem. Sturdy or not, it's a short trip from "nice pumpkin" to splat.

Hold the pumpkin and smell it around the stem and top. If it smells very strong and "pumpkin-y" then there is a chance that it's too ripe, pass it up and look for another. Thump the pumpkin and listen for a solid "thunk". A hollow sound is bad news.

Carry your pumpkin carefully and transport it home safely. A bruised pumpkin rots quickly and might not make it through the Halloween season.

How to prepare the pumpkin for its coming facelift

1. Cut a circle around the top of the pumpkin without damaging the stem.
2. Remove the top and put aside.
3. Remove and discard the pulp and seeds unless you want to make Vampire Fingernails snacks for your Halloween party.
4. With a putty knife or similar scraper, gently scrape down the inside of the pumpkin to remove any moist flesh clinging to the sides. Be careful not to damage the wall of the pumpkin.

Now it's time to transfer the stencil

1. Wipe the outside of the pumpkin so that it is free of dust and other foreign material. If you need to wipe it down with a wet rag, allow it to become thoroughly dry before proceeding to the next step.
2. Tape the stencil to the side of the pumpkin that you have chosen to be the face. Tape the top left corner first, then the top right, bottom left and then bottom right. Smooth the stencil out as you are taping it. If you have to crease the stencil to make it lie flat then be sure to pick areas that are not part of the design.
3. Using an ice pick or a pin-point punch awl, gently poke holes through the stencil and into the pumpkin. Follow the lines of the stencil carefully. It's a lot like paying connect-the-dots games. Space the dots out however you see fit but remember that very complex designs are easier to work with if the holes are close together.
4. Check carefully to make sure that you have transferred the entire pattern and then remove the stencil. Keep the stencil

handy to refer to in case you get confused while cutting.

Time to put your patient under the knife

Although many a pumpkin has fallen under the standard kitchen knife, it's both the wrong tool and a very dangerous tool for pumpkin carving. For best results get yourself an X-Acto knife with a #5 knife blade and a #15 keyhole saw. See your home store for both items.

Using the saw for long cuts and the X-Acto for the close-in and intricate cuts, just follow the pattern carefully and, before you know it, you'll have the pride of the pumpkin patch right there on your table!

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