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FLORIDA HORTICULTURE FOR HEALTH NETWORK

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The Florida Horticulture for Health Network's vision: To promote activities and connect organizations to each other and to resources that use horticulture to improve health including therapeutic horticulture and horticultural therapy, landscapes for health, nature, emerging professional support, allied horticulture and health services, community and school gardens, and food action initiatives.

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Cucurbit Conundrum: Pumpkin or Squash?

Text by Nicole Weymouth & Lesley Fleming, HTR
Photos by M. Grabkowska.Unsplash & N. Weymouth

The fall season brings with it pumpkins everywhere, and with it confusion about this plant. Is it pumpkin or squash that makes pies, lattes and jack-o'-lanterns so appealing? To add to the conundrum, the word pumpkin is used to describe many orange, round fruits. But that doesn't ease the confusion for many gardeners, cooks or Halloween enthusiasts.

All pumpkins are squash, but not all squash are pumpkins according to horticulturists. Pumpkins and squash are both cucurbits. They share common characteristics of large leaves, long vines, tendrils for climbing, and separate male and female flowers. They belong to the *Cucurbitaceae* family that includes fruits and vegetables like cucumbers, melons, gourds, and luffas. And they are classified as a fruit not a vegetable. So, what is the difference between a squash and a pumpkin? And how can so many stores and people get it wrong, interchanging names, selling them side by side, and not acknowledging different species and cultivars?

There are three primary species for most North American pumpkins and squash: *Cucurbita pepo, Cucurbita maxima,* and *Cucurbita moschata*. Each has specific characteristics and typically used for specific purposes or products.

Cucurbita pepo includes both summer and winter squash, zucchini, spaghetti, acorn and delicata squash, and classic orange pumpkins used for carving jack-o'-lanterns. *Cucurbito pepo* pumpkins are preferred for their large round orange color and hard shell. Their flesh is typically watery and stringy, with mild flavor, not very desirable for baking. The glowing jack-o'-lantern (*Cucurbita pepo*) mistakenly gets all of the recognition for the Dickinson squash's (*Cucurbita moschata*) delectable taste.

The second major species, ***Cucurbita maxima***, includes hard-skinned winter squash - Blue Hubbard, Kabocha, Jarrahdale, Rouge Vif d'Etampes, Marina di Chioggia, and Galeu d'Eysines. These have more fibers and more flavor and considered to have good storage qualities. This species also includes many heirloom varieties with diverse colors, shapes and culinary qualities.

Cucurbita moschata varieties are most often selected for pies and baked goods. Though the commercially canned product labels in stores show a pie or pie slice, it is butternut squash or Dickinson squash or pumpkin - the same plant with different common names (Alfaro, 2021), with naturally sweet flavor, fine texture and saturated orange color used for these food products.

Understanding the cucurbit family, specifically pumpkins and squash, can help gardeners, cooks, consumers and horticultural therapists select what will suit their needs best. This can include crop selection, cooking ingredients, flavor and carving fall decorations. The positives - great diversity within the Cucurbit family and among pumpkins and squash. This far outweighs the conundrum of whether it is a pumpkin or squash, a fruit or a vegetable.

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Nicole Weymouth recently completed the University of Florida Horticultural Therapy Certificate Program and is pursuing registration as a Horticultural Therapist (HTR). Her interests include horticultural education, plant science, and helping make horticultural science accessible to gardeners and horticultural professionals. Lesley Fleming, HTR has used pumpkins in her therapeutic horticulture programming for all ages and populations.

THAD Therapeutic Horticulture Activity Database

Activity: Nature Goal: Physical Populations: Children

TH Activity Plan – Pumpkin Tee Time

Text by Maureen Bethel, BA, BEd, CAE & Lesley Fleming, HTR
Photo by Happily Ever Mom

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will create designs on pumpkins for Fall or Halloween, practicing hand-eye coordination.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:
Cognitive/Intellectual: Learn about pumpkins & STEM concepts such as weight, density & force while exploring creativity
Physical: Develop hand-eye coordination; strengthen hand skills; develop sense of resistance & sense of strength hammering; practice using dominant & non-dominant hands for tasks
Psychological/Emotional: Develop persistence & patience; cope with pain (hitting fingers)
Sensory: Explore sensory inputs touching, viewing & smelling pumpkins
Social: Learn to share (i.e., materials, workspace)

Materials

Medium sized pumpkins, multi-colored golf tees, paper stickers with holes, non-toxic markers

Small child-sized wooden hammers or blocks, plastic toy hammers, small adult sized hammers

First aid kit, anti-slip mats, wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Grow &/or purchase medium-sized pumpkins. Gather all materials. Make a sample.
2. Facilitator begins session by letting participants touch pumpkins placed on tables in work/play area.
3. Facilitator demonstrates the proper use of small hammers & blocks. Stress care & asking for help from an adult when needed.
4. Use simple verbal & visual directions to demonstrate activity.
5. Participants stick adhesive holes to pumpkin (in any pattern), push or hammer golf tee into the target (the paper hole) using a small wooden block or hammer. An initial step can be added if needed; hammer golf tees into pumpkin anywhere as practice.
6. Ask participants open-ended questions throughout session. "How will the golf tee fit inside the holes? How hard do you have to hammer? What happens if you look away from the hole when putting the tee in? Which hand is easier to hammer with?"
7. Conclude session by reading a pumpkin book: *The Itsy-Bitsy Pumpkin or Patty's Pumpkin Patch.* Or doing action rhyme *Five Little Pumpkins.*

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: An activity for preschoolers and young children using pumpkins to develop and strengthen hand-eye coordination can be fun and therapeutic at the same time. To strengthen decision-making skills, let the children create their own design by placing the stickers on the pumpkins in any pattern or number of their choosing. They can return to this step throughout the activity. Facilitator should watch the time during the session, and at some point, suggest participants begin hammering golf tees into the targets/holes. Encouraging children to self-guide themselves can be the beginning of many skills – making decisions, time management, creative thinking, figuring out dominant vs. non-dominant hand. Guiding the child to use their dominant and non-dominant hands may be a first introduction to this. Assistance can be given by someone else holding the tee in place, with a focus on participant using the dominant hand alone.

Risky play or free play is important to a child's development. This activity involves use of tools that may cause injury (e.g., hitting their fingers). Chance of injury is mitigated by demonstrating how to use the tool, supervising the use of the tool by the children, and determining the appropriate tool based on the children's age. For example, a four-year-old with poor coordination can have an adult start the process and the child use a plastic hammer to finish placing the tee.

The Canadian Paediatric Society states: "Risky play is defined by thrilling and exciting forms of free play that involve uncertainty of outcome and a possibility of physical injury. Proponents of risky play differentiate 'risk' from 'hazard' and seek to reframe perceived risk as an opportunity for situational evaluation and personal development. This statement weighs the burden of play-related injuries alongside the evidence in favour of risky play, including its benefits, risks, and nuances, which can vary depending on a child's developmental stage, ability, and social and medical context." (Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention | Canadian Paediatric Society, 2024)

Once pumpkins have been teed up, they can become decorative items for children to admire their handiwork. Alternatively, pumpkins can be cut up and used for animal feed or pumpkin recipes (if they are still food safe). This activity was adapted from several online sites and has been mentioned as a Montessori-inspired activity.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Medium sized pumpkins not mini pumpkins work best for this activity. Ensure tees and wooden hammering blocks do not have splinters. Work with participants who may need help determining degree of strength without harming selves.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Variations on this activity of hammering golf tees into pumpkins: use multi-colored tees, facilitator adheres stickers to form child's name or initials, do not use the stickers at all, use children sized hammers, children's gloves, and children's safety googles, lobster mallets, or pull-out tees or insert small twigs to look like a hedgehog.

If using real hammers (child-sized recommended), encourage participants to remove tees from pumpkins using the hammer's claw. This may be too challenging for some children.

Other plants can be substituted: watermelons and squashes (though squashes will be smaller and may be more challenging). This activity can be preceded by a trip to a pumpkin farm or harvesting pumpkins from the garden.

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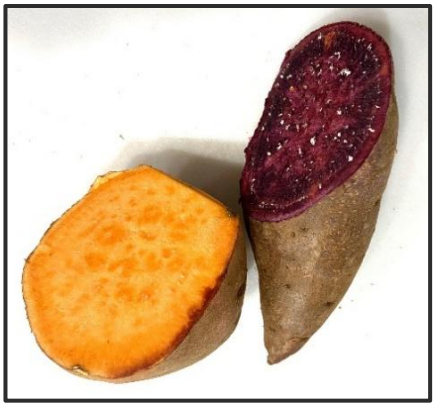
TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2026.



Superfood Sweet Potato and Food Security

Text & photos by Lesley Fleming, HTR & Antonia Phillips

Food security advocates say sweet potato is important in addressing food shortages. Sweet potato is a nutrient dense vegetable that grows well in many conditions. Referred to as a superfood, sweet potatoes are becoming increasingly associated with strategies for food insecurity worldwide.

Food insecurity, referring to reduced quality, variety, access, shortage, anxiety, or disruptions in eating patterns and food intake, is a global crisis (Economic Research Service, USDA, 2026). Sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is the 7th most grown crop worldwide. The root vegetable from the *Convolvulaceae* family, offers edible tuberous roots that vary in shape and color depending on its variety. Skin color varies from purple to white, with attributes of high water-use efficiency, prevention of soil erosion, effective cover crop, high nutritional content, ability to withstand and grow in poor terrain, high yields, skin that sets well to minimize damage, and ability to store well (Sapakhova et al., 2023; Jiang, 2025).

Increasing interest in sweet potato is guiding increased production in both developed and developing countries as a global strategy for food insecurity because of its dietary properties and organoleptic characteristics of color, aroma and taste.

Sweet potato provides vitamins A and C, carbohydrates, beta-carotene (orange-colored ones), anthocyanins (purple-colored ones), fiber, iron, potassium and protein. Noted for antioxidant properties, studies have shown positive links between sweet potato and kidney and liver health and reduced blood sugar (Topel, 2024). Sweet potatoes are unique vegetables for many reasons including starch-degrading enzymes that are accelerated during cooking process, and beta-carotene which becomes more bioavailable after cooking (Jiang, 2025).

Sweet potatoes are best grown in warm climates that can be adaptable with flexible planting and harvesting times. It is considered to have a short growing season, a benefit for food production. Statistical analysis by Kovtun et al., (2024) determined that sweet potato production is highest in Asia and Africa, with USA also producing large numbers. Europe has limited production, though more recent production in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece has emerged (Kovtun et al., 2024). More profitable crops being produced in Asia have decreased sweet potato production in Vietnam, Indonesia, China and India (Kovtun et al., 2024).

Varieties popular in the USA include Covington, Stokes Purple (purple in color), Orleans and Bayou Belle. Sweet potato production in the US has declined due to "labor costs, unavailability of seeds and bulbs, and insect-resistant pests" (Topel, 2026). North Carolina State University's research and promotion of sweet potatoes have been instrumental in reinvigorating interest in this vegetable. NCS University is recognized for its leading role in breeding the Covington variety, increasing production in North Carolina to become the leading producer of sweet potato in the USA with its year-round production, as well as its promotion of sweet potato as a nutrient-dense food addressing global food insecurity (Krueger, 2026).

According to researchers Sapakhova et al. (2023), "sweet potato is one of the most economically important crops for addressing global food security and climate change issues", particularly in conditions found in developing countries. Cultivars that are drought tolerant are much sought after, with horticulture research and experimentation occurring to identify high yield and drought tolerant varieties". Sweet potato is drought sensitive and able to have some adaptations to drought conditions. Advancements in molecular sweet potato breeding and gene expression, use of biotechnology tools and some funding from international agencies are furthering the role of this vegetable as a remedy for food insecurity.

Research on sweet potato continues to expand, with keen interest in environmental barriers like salinity (Mishra, et al., 2026), the hexaploid nature of sweet potato with six sets of chromosomes, as well as multiple uses including ethanol for biofuels or consumption (vodka), livestock feed, ornamental purposes (Jiang, 2025), chemical make-up and best food processing methods (Krueger, 2026).

Considered an orphan crop because big corporations are not involved in sweet potato production, less funding for research has meant it, unlike corn and wheat, has not had the level of research and development (Krueger, 2026). Cultural preferences and educational awareness, in Africa in particular, pose challenges to increasing consumption of orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, impacting its use for food security. However, food applications with sweet potato flavor infusion are expanding, most often in developed countries, where they are used in muffins, syrup, sausage, beer and as sweet potato flour.

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From the Horticulture for Health Perspective: Models of Food Security Initiatives

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR & Antonia Phillips
Photos by L. Fleming, Beacon Food Forest, Heart of Dinner & Hope Blooms

Food security is a global issue that is being addressed using a variety of strategies. Many of these involve horticulture as a mainstay of initiatives - to grow food and feed people, expand nutritional intake, and include community members and organizations in efforts seeking to alleviate food insecurity. Using the horticulture for health framework (Fleming, 2021), and the Florida Horticulture for Health Network's Resource Hub, models of food security initiatives have been identified. Most of the examples cited are replicable and have proven to be effective in reducing food insecurity.

Food insecurity is defined as not having enough food to eat and not knowing where the next meal will come from (Feeding America, 2026). Definitions are now expanding to include household-level economic and social conditions of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. There is recognition that food insecurity can be temporary, and that multiple factors influence food insecurity (USDA ERS, n.d.). Of particular note is the USDA's clarification that "hunger is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity… a potential consequence of food insecurity, that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation" (USDA ERS, n.d.).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses the following labels to define ranges of food security: (2006)

"**Food Security**

- High food security (old label = Food security): no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
- Marginal food security (old label = Food security): one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. There is little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.

Food Insecurity

- Low food security (old label = Food insecurity without hunger): reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. There is little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- Very low food security (old label = Food insecurity with hunger): reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" (UDSA ERS, 2026).

USDA Economic Research Service. (2026). Definitions of food security.

Food insecurity is considered by many to be a systemic issue. Multiple factors contribute to food insecurity: low wages and lack of income, unemployment, disabilities, high cost of living, limited access to grocery stores, cost of health care and medicines, and food systems.

Strategies and interventions addressing food insecurity vary greatly. In North America these include: governmental policies, institutional programming and funding on all levels (WIC, SNAP); community-led initiatives like community gardens, community kitchens, food banks; school-based programs; and healthcare services (food prescriptions, patient food boxes) (National Library of Medicine, n.d.). Additional mechanisms, identified by the horticulture for health framework, include alternative food networks, food alliances, mobile food markets, food is medicine movement and produce prescription programs among others (FLHHN Resource Hub, 2026).

The following 25 models demonstrate wide-ranging approaches seeking to reduce food insecurity, where horticulture plays an important role. The models are sourced from the Florida Horticulture for Health Network's Resource Hub – Food Security Initiatives.

Seeds and shared kitchens: SPARK Seeds community seed lending library in Sobrante Park, CA delivered in conjunction with *Planting Justice* organization, with resources in Spanish and English, focuses on seeds to increase individual's food production. *Shared Kitchens* in Nova Scotia is a project

delivered through the *Foodweb Network* where underused kitchen space can be rented to small food businesses, with information on permits and food safety, insurance and liability, scheduling/storage/logistics, and best practices for renting kitchens are available.

Social enterprise initiatives - *Fleet Farming*, a nonprofit in central Florida, offers a model where lawns become edible gardens and micro-farms. Their motto – Grow Food, Not Lawns - practices this with lawn transformations, lawns donated to grow food, fresh produce to local venues, swarm bike rides (to view demonstration gardens) and monthly plant sales, internships, and educational classes.

College food gardens at *We/Me Farm at Paul Quinn College* converted its football field into a farm, in support of food production and food security in a Dallas TX area known as a food desert. And *Acadia University Community Farm* in Wolfville, NS offers university students access to nature, plants and food.

Food forests, growing in number and addressing food insecurity include *Beacon Food Forest* in Seattle Washington, open to the public for foraging on the 7-acre plot that is adjacent to a local park, with classes and work parties all focused on strengthening the community. *Denver Food Forests* provide free fruit in addition to greening the environment in this agroforestry effort in Colorado.

Community gardens have been and continue to be important delivery sites for food security strategies where different models address the particular needs of individuals and communities. *Green Haven Project* in Overtown, FL is a non-profit organization that creates community gardens in food deserts and provides locally grown food free to community members, along with educational workshops on horticulture and nutrition for youth. *Western Maryland Health System* has 20 sites for community gardens affiliated with its hospitals for use by patients and staff.

Child-focused food security programming is evident in many communities. *Foraging with Kids in Mi'kma'ki* is an initiative from *Nourish Nova Scotia*, providing a 4-season activity guide that includes *Mi'kmaw* plant names, identification tips and recipes for 12 wild foods. *Acta Non Verba Youth Urban Farm Project (ANV)* Oakland CA is a safe outdoor space for children, youth and families focused on nutrition, food production and healthy living, founded and led mainly by women of color and includes *BeetBox Community CSA*, youth programs and farm experiences.

Health services with a food security theme are intertwined with food advocacy, food and nutrition support, emerging in greater numbers in a variety of healthcare settings. *Greener Partners* strengthens community health through equitable no-cost fresh produce distribution, gardens and farms. *Deaver Wellness Farm* is an education and production farm on the hospital campus of *Lankenau Medical Center*, part of *Main Line Health.* The Farm Explorer is a mobile farm educational experience. *Grow2Heal Community Garden* in southwest Florida uses an affiliated vegetable farm for food production and nutrition education on hospital-owned vacant land of *Homestead Hospital. Doctors Hospital* in Coral Gardens, *West Kendall and South Miami Hospitals* also have *Grow2Health* gardens. *Nutrition Garden Rx*

non-profit works with groups to co-design and implement therapeutic model gardens that address specific health conditions, improve nutrition lifestyles and/or general wellness, as well as to facilitate transfer of models to communities and healthcare communities in the Portland OR area. *The Sky Farm at Eskenazi Hospital* in Indianapolis, IN is used for patient education and to supply their cafeterias with fresh produce.

Food as Medicine initiatives like *Windy City Harvest "Food as Medicine Project"*, delivered in conjunction with *Chicago Horticultural Society* received funding from *National Institute of Food and Agriculture.* Addressing goal #39 to "increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers participating in SNAP by providing incentives at point of purchase", this also included health care education, coupons at farmers' markets, produce boxes, education sessions, and *Youth Farm and Corps* programs.

Food drop-off programs across communities - *Little Village Environmental Justice Organization* (LVEJO) in Chicago's largest community of Mexican Americans in the Midwest, provides multifaceted community-led food action like hot meal drop-offs, backyard garden startups, *Farm Food Familias* project and a new farm. *Heart of Dinner program* from a New York non-profit delivers weekly groceries and hot meals to Asian elders while building community, its own supply chains and strengthening Asian-owned restaurants, grocery stores and farms. *Meals for Native Institutions (MNI) Program,* developed by *North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems*, is using an approach to restore Indigenous food systems by scaling up the production and distribution of traditional, culturally grounded meals for delivery to institutional partners (in Minnesota). In 2026, MNI will deliver ready-to-eat meals sending Indigenous ingredients to schools, healthcare centers, tribal colleges, and elder programs.

Multi-faceted programs and services are being delivered at sites that take a holistic approach to food insecurity. *Project New Village, San Diego located at Mt. Hope Community Garden* uses a mobile food truck, *People's Produce Mobile Farmers Market*, neighborhood growers' network, *Golden Groceries Program,* a CSA subscription, and the *Equitable Food Oriented Development* non-profit focused on reparative wealth building to address food insecurity. *Hope Blooms*, a Nova Scotia non-profit runs several programs with food security focus - a *Fair Food Farmers' Market* that offers food with greater degree of dignity where community members choose their own food to take home, use crypto app for those who can pay, avoiding any stigma to who is paying and who needs food help. *Culinary Arts Program* for youth 12-18 years participating in an afterschool weekly program led by Chef and Manager of Food Programs at *Hope Blooms* based on *Culinary Institute's* first-year course, and includes food literacy skills, meal preparations for community, and culinary competitions. Its *Youth Organic Urban*

Agriculture Program teaches how to grow organic food in a 4,000 sq foot food garden, using STEM education, intended to teach skills for future careers, with support from Halifax [city] Community Investment Fund. Numerous webinars, websites and videos share resources on how to address food insecurity.

Topics are diverse reflecting the diversity of food insecurity—cafeteria to compost, *Cornell University Garden-based Learning, Food Navigator* website, *Indigenous Foodways* resources, and *No Kid Hungry* organization website. Links with short descriptions of these and other resources are available at the FLHHN Resource Hub free and online.

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Lesley Fleming, HTR has been interested in the intersection of plant-based food, horticulture for health and food insecurity since being involved with Halifax, NS Common Roots Urban Farm Advisory Committee and its effort to address this global and local issue. She researched and revised the FLHHN Resource Hub Food Security Initiatives content in 2023, 2024 and 2025. Antonia Phillips is committed to using the natural world for health improvements including people-plant interactions in a variety of settings for more than 15 years working with vulnerable populations. Currently, she is Project Manager with the CCRCE School Board in NS, developing the first Geodome Greenhouse at a high school in the province. One of the purposes of the greenhouse is to teach the students how to grow their own greens for their Salad Bar in addition to their Free Hot Lunch that the students prepare on a daily basis. This program ensures everyone has the opportunity to have a healthy meal Monday to Friday. Antonia is a landscape horticulturist educated at Nova Scotia Agricultural College.

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Upcoming Issue of *Cultivate* Winter 2027:
Adapting TH Activities for Different Populations

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