

Illinois Extension Discusses Pumpkin Smash Events In Early November

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CHICAGO — Jack-o'-lanterns live a short, scary life. That is unless they are catapulted, hurled, or whacked into a compost pile after spooky season is over.

Green your Halloween by recycling pumpkins after the holiday at one of more than a dozen University of Illinois Extension Pumpkin Smash community composting events in early November. Illinois is one of the top producers of pumpkins in the U.S., but when gourds are past their prime, many end up in the same old haunts – landfills.

“With twice as many smashes in 2023, we can potentially double the number of pumpkins kept out of landfills,” said one of the event coordinators Kathryn Pereira, Illinois Extension local foods and small farms educator.

Organic food waste like pumpkins produce the potent greenhouse gas methane as they decompose without oxygen in landfills. They also leach water that filters through the trash and pollutes surrounding waterways.

Extension’s events are done in collaboration with SCARCE, an Illinois environmental non-profit that started Pumpkin Smashes in 2014. Illinois Extension joined the effort and hosted its first Pumpkin Smash in 2019. In the past nine years, Illinois Pumpkin Smashes have composted more than 1,012 tons of pumpkins reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 751 tons of Co2 emissions.

While launching a pumpkin from a catapult is guaranteed to be a smashing good time, the family-friendly events with the motto “don’t trash it, smash it” are also an opportunity for communities to connect and learn how they can compost year-round.

Participants can collect pumpkins for their neighborhood, school, or workplace and drop them off for free at the outdoor events. Candles, ribbons, and any other non-organic materials should be removed. They deposit their pumpkins – through the method of their choosing – into a dumpster which is then transported to a composting facility.

Smashes available at 12 locations in Cook County, as well as in Lake, McHenry, Macomb, Kane, and McLean counties on November 3 or 4. Find an Extension Pumpkin Smash in your area and more information at go.illinois.edu/PumpkinSmash. Find a full map of Pumpkin Smashes on their website at SCARCE.org/Pumpkins.

The event is making its debut downstate for the first time in 2023. Extension horticulture educator Christopher Enroth is hosting Macomb’s first smash to help meet a need in the community.

“Many Illinoisians are buying more than just jack-o’-lanterns so farmers are growing all different types, sizes, and shapes of pumpkins as fall décor,” Evans said. “Finding a suitable place to toss all these pumpkins is difficult and most people want their pumpkins to provide some benefit to the environment.”

Those who cannot attend a smash event may still be able to compost through their local trash provider, private service, or by starting a compost pile. Long after the pumpkins are forgotten they will be absorbed into the earth below contributing to soil health. Learn how to get started composting at extension.illinois.edu/compost.

“Composting can be done on a community level through events or municipal waste collection, but it can also be done on a small scale,” Pereira says. “You can compost in your own backyard using a compost bin or even in your apartment with a worm bin.”

Do not dump pumpkins on private property or nature preserves. It is littering and illegal and can harm wildlife.

Natural areas often become a dumping spot for yard waste, pumpkins, straw, and other organic decorations in fall. If dropped off in ditches or near roadsides, animals will be drawn in close to traffic where they may get hit.

The thought is that these items will compost, but Peggy Doty, Illinois Extension energy and environment stewardship educator, says it has a negative impact.

“Straw and pumpkins smother native plants and creates odd little microhabitats that are not healthy and full of molds,” Doty says. “Pumpkins can now be found growing in preserves, probably from last year’s pumpkin dumping.”

ABOUT ILLINOIS EXTENSION: Illinois Extension leads public outreach for University of Illinois by translating research into action plans that allow Illinois families, businesses, and community leaders to solve problems, make informed decisions, and adapt to changes and opportunities. Illinois Extension is part of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences.