



featured

Couple produce pampered pumpkins,

By Sharon Williams

Dumb luck!

That's what Rhonda Schmeltzer called the first two years of her endeavor into the world of pumpkins.

She is happy to say that, six years later, it is an entirely different story.

Rhonda and her husband, Phil, own 30 acres 10 miles south of Worland. At one time, alfalfa, corn, sugar beets, and malt barley were grown on the land.

Now, 12 acres are subleased to a neighbor who grows sugar beets and barley. Four and three-quarters acres are reserved for *The Patch* – a pumpkin patch, that is. Twelve varieties of pumpkins, 12 varieties of winter squash, and 11 kinds of gourds, both soft and hard (for painting), are grown. The rest of the acreage is reserved for the Schmeltzer's home and outbuildings.

Rhonda has quilted for 25 years, so it seemed fitting they named their store *The Patch* – a combination of quilting patch and pumpkin patch. Besides pumpkins, gourds, and squash, she sells her beautiful



Photo by Rhonda Schmeltzer

Naming their store The Patch combined Rhonda's quilt work with pumpkins, squash, and gourds.

quilts, table runners, wall hangings, and appliquéd towels. You will also find miniature metal men holding pumpkins. She buys the sculptures from Worland High School's FFA chapter.

In the beginning, there were just one and a half acres planted with four varieties of big jack-o'-lantern pumpkins plus acorn squash. There were plenty of bees for pollination and no weeds! The family living room became the storefront.

"Oh, my heavens!"

Rhonda recalls. "The first two years, I'd have to say we got lucky. We have learned a lot since then. There was definitely a learning curve! But the *third* year, we had lots of weeds and noticed our pumpkins weren't producing as well."

They weren't discouraged. Instead, they called the University of Wyoming College of Agriculture for information and had their soil tested. It lacked phosphorus and nitrogen.

Along with irrigation water came seeds of the unfortunate variety: weeds and unwanted grass. So they called the Washakie County Weed and Pest Control District for advice. Also, on larger farms, Rhonda found that pumpkins were rotated with two years of alfalfa,

which kept weeds to a minimum. They planted their pumpkins directly after alfalfa that first year, which kept weeds down, but they did not have room to rotate so weeds gradually increased. They use Roundup on some things (carefully avoiding the fruit) and hand-pull Russian knapweed – their most prevalent irritant.

That third year, too, Phil built a separate building to house their wares. In the off-season, it is reserved for Phil and his card-playing buddies, with the option



landowners

succulent squash, grand gourds

of quilting classes there someday.

Other resource professionals contacted included seed company agronomists (those who apply the science of soils in relation to crops) and the UW Cooperative Extension Service. Helpful, too, was the experience of others who had pumpkin patches. Rhonda talked with growers in Sheridan and Thermopolis. She also consulted a man from Harris Seeds in New York who had a pumpkin patch.

"There is plenty of information on the Internet, but be careful," Rhonda warned, "as what works in one state may not be what works in Wyoming's climate."

The Schmeltzers noticed their bee population decreasing, so this is the third year they hired Bryant Honey Inc. of Worland to place beehives at the edges of the fields. They do not know why there are fewer bees as time went on



Rhonda and Phil Schmeltzer started their pumpkin, squash, and gourd business six years ago south of Worland.

but are glad for the service as it has helped pollination – crucial to production. Recently, Rhonda stopped in at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center in Worland. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) gave her an aerial map with their fields outlined. It was a great tool for their planning purposes. The Natural Resources Conservation Service

(NRCS), in the same USDA Service Center, offers agronomic assistance, which includes pest, nutrient, irrigation, and conservation crop rotation management plans.

"Timing is key when planting," Rhonda says. "The tricky part with the hard gourds is they need a longer growing season than others. They need 120 frost-free days, which

"It is extremely satisfying to see the smiles on children's faces as they race to pick out their perfect pumpkin."

Rhonda Schmeltzer

is sometimes hard to get here. Pumpkins don't like freeze. Thankfully, we haven't lost any crop to freeze."

Ask Rhonda what she would tell people thinking of starting their own pumpkin patch, and she would tell them: "The biggest thing is to start small. Start with a couple varieties of pumpkin and a couple kinds of winter squash. Get a feel for the market first. What does the community want?"

Now into their sixth year, the Schmeltzers try to provide as much as they can for the needs of the community. That means about one-third of their customers are families looking for the ideal Halloween pumpkin, one-third shops for quilted crafts, and one-third are interested in winter squash and decorative



Photo by Rhonda Schmeltzer

A building constructed in the third year of operation houses The Patch.

gourds. The hardest thing to see, Rhonda says, is little kids who come out the day before Halloween and there are no pumpkins left.

Particularly for Phil, the job is incredibly labor intensive, since everything is done by hand – planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting. He works the

patch after his regular day job as a painting contractor. Rhonda not only quilts commission pieces but is the bookkeeper for their painting business. They are grateful to the youth volunteers from St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church in Worland, who help plant each spring.

Nevertheless, all their hard work pays off in the fall as excited kindergartners and first graders exclaim at each other over the many kinds of jack-o'-lanterns and pumpkins. Rhonda tells them about growing pumpkins and gives each child a unique gourd to take home. Third graders get to pick their own pumpkins – one they can carry themselves, which can be quite entertaining, she says.

Open every day mid-September through Halloween, 1 p.m. to dark, the store becomes a non-stop job.

Why does she do it?

"Fall is my favorite time of year. I remember pumpkin patches as a kid," she says. "It touches a part of me – reminds me of fall in Indiana, which is where I'm from originally."

The Patch has been a great experience. It has allowed them to meet the people of Worland they don't always get to see. "It is extremely satisfying to see the smiles on children's faces as they race to pick out their perfect pumpkin," Rhonda says.

If you would like to contact Rhonda, her e-mail is rhondainwyo@yahoo.com.

A UW CES bulletin contains information about raising pumpkins. It is free online at <http://ces.uwyo.edu/PUBS/B1115.pdf>.

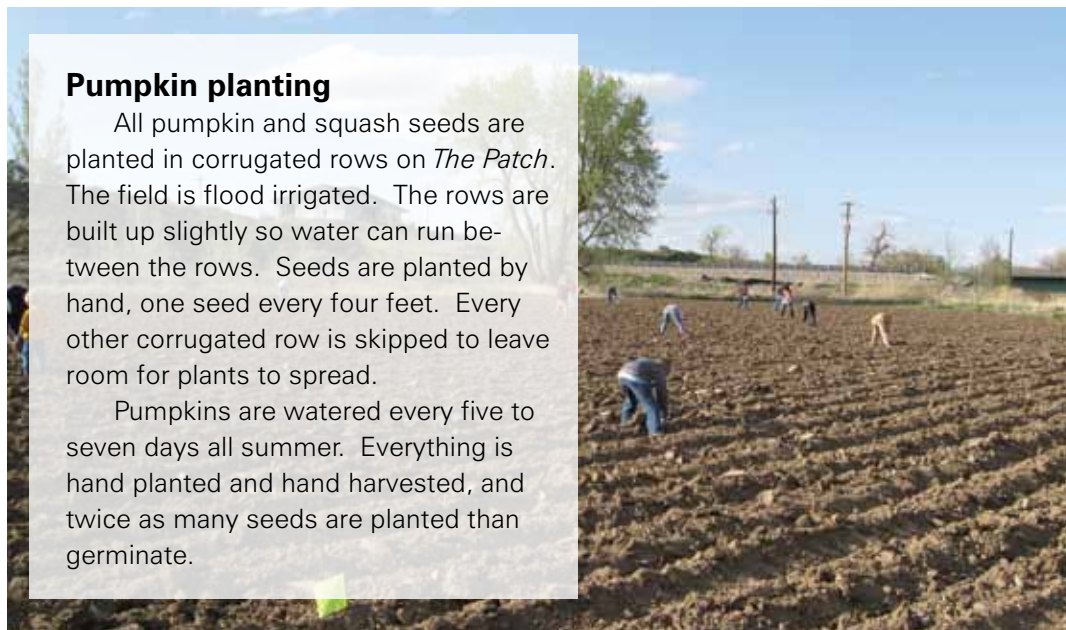


Photo by Rhonda Schmeltzer

Pumpkin planting

All pumpkin and squash seeds are planted in corrugated rows on *The Patch*. The field is flood irrigated. The rows are built up slightly so water can run between the rows. Seeds are planted by hand, one seed every four feet. Every other corrugated row is skipped to leave room for plants to spread.

Pumpkins are watered every five to seven days all summer. Everything is hand planted and hand harvested, and twice as many seeds are planted than germinate.

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