

2017 North American record holder Joel Holland of Sumner WA took some time to answer questions from PNWGPG reporter Gerry Gadberry that will be appear in our newsletter and on our website for our members. Thank you for your contribution Joel we appreciate the time you have taken to share some of your knowledge and growing techniques with us!



1: What got you started in this hobby and how long have you been growing giants?

I became interested in growing giant pumpkins after seeing the specimens at the Puyallup Fair in the 1970s. The big ones at that time were around 200 lbs. I decided to try and grow one and just ordered "Atlantic Giant" seeds from a seed catalog. I was fortunate enough to win 1st place at the Fair with a pumpkin that weighed 244 lbs. on my 1st try. Despite this early success, I didn't immediately start growing every year. We had young twin girls to take care of and I was still early in my new career with the Puyallup Fire Dept. and worked a 24 hr. shift. I think by the early to mid-1980s I was growing every season.

2: What is your typical weather like and how big is your growing area?

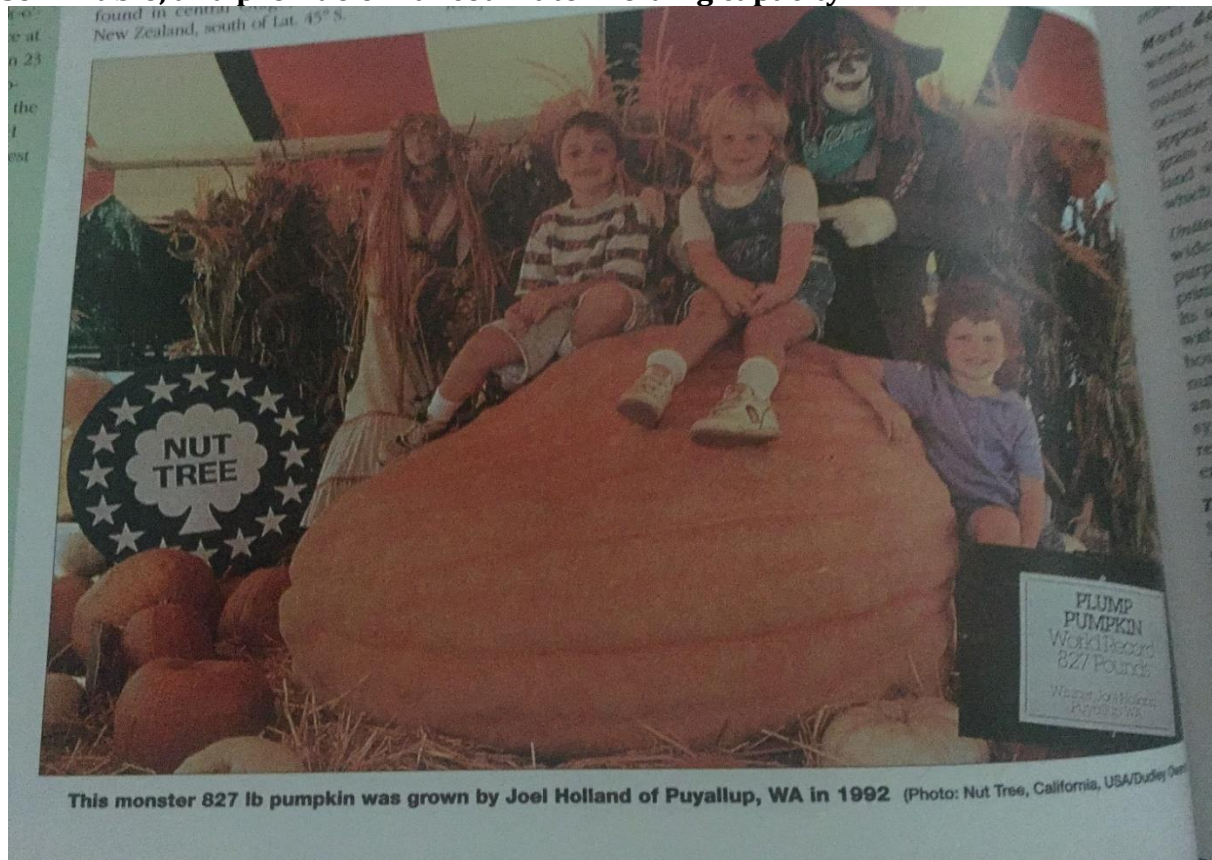
We have the typical Western WA. Weather which is heavily influenced with "Onshore Flow" from the Pacific. The average highs in mid-Summer are 76 and the lows 55. We have a long frost free season, but most years lack enough summer heat to make them grow to their potential. We had a warm, sunny summer in 1992 that allowed me to grow a World Record Pumpkin of 827 lbs., which we took to The Nut Tree in Vacaville, Ca.

I used to grow in up to 10,000 sq. ft. but have cut back over the last few years to less than half of that.

3: Can you describe your soil type and typical amendments, cover crops, and patch prep techniques you use?

In the early years, I was growing on South Hill between Puyallup and Graham. The soil there was a clay loam with a fair amount of stones. The 1992-827 was grown there as well my first 3 wins at Half Moon Bay. Since 1998 we have been in the Puyallup River Valley on fine sandy loam.

The valley soil had a pH of 5.3, so the 1st order of business was to add ground limestone. The soil was also low in Calcium, Magnesium, Sulfur, Boron, & Manganese. The Ground limestone helped with the Calcium as well as raising the pH, I alternated to Dolomitic limestone on the 2nd application to boost the Mg. I have always used mostly organic amendments. The other deficiencies were addressed with products such as Langbeinite, granular Manganese, and Solubor. I have grown cover crops since the beginning and used straight Winter Rye for many years. I am currently using a combination of Winter Rye, Winter Oats, and Vetch which is a legume that can fix atmospheric Nitrogen. My fertilizer program has evolved over the years, but I have used the program we have outlined at www.hollandsgiants.com for approx. 10 years. I also add “Scarecrows Pride” manure to keep up the organic matter, keep the soil friable, and provide enhanced water holding capacity.



This monster 827 lb pumpkin was grown by Joel Holland of Puyallup, WA in 1992 (Photo: Nut Tree, California, USA/Dudley O'Neil)

4: What is your water source, how much water do you typically use a week and do you use “fertigation” to inject nutrients into the water?

We have City water. When building at the Valley location we laid in a 2” water line that allows high volume flow. The water is in the low 50s which can shock pumpkin plants. I fill a 1,550 gallon black tank to warm the water. The water heats passively from the black tank and I have an active system as well. When I was on South Hill I pumped water through a solar collector on our roof. Here in the valley I lay out 400 ft. or more of dark colored hose on black asphalt and pump water from the tank through the hose and right back into the tank. I think it really helps here in the Pacific Northwest, but in warmer areas it may not be as important.

I used to have a fertilizer injector for adding solubles to the irrigation water, but in an effort to simplify things, I have been adding directly to the tank which has a circulating feature for mixing. I also do a lot of applications with a “Dial N Spray” hose end sprayer, especially early to mid-season. How much water I use depends on the weather. I watch the leaves and try to keep them fully turgid.

5: Your 2363 Half Moon Bay Winner was an amazing accomplishment was it grown under a greenhouse or outdoors? How did you decide on what seeds to grow and do you think the World Record will be beat this year?

Thank you. It was grown outside for the most part. Like all my plants it had an early season cloche until about mid-June. My most promising plants also get a late season cover to protect from frost. The plant with the 2363 pumpkin was covered the final 3 weeks of the season. Growing in a greenhouse would be a big advantage as you can control the CO2 level and the growing environment. I am too near the end of my career to think about going to a commercial greenhouse setup. Someday there will probably be two separate records. One for outdoors and one for greenhouse grown.

6: Can you share your early season planting site layout for us (hoop houses, soil heating cables, growing pit/ mounds, magic ferry dust) ☺

My most promising plants each get a 16’ x 16’ hoop house. I have others that are 7’ x 10’. The larger hoop houses do get soil heating cables and they have a built in watering/misting line as well.

I have never dug pits at the planting sites, I try and build up the entire growing area. I follow just what we recommend on the website previously mentioned as far as fertilizer, foliar feeding, etc.

7: What does your fertilizer / fungicide / insect program typically look like? Are you an organic gardener, commercial fertilizer user or both and is you’re fertilizing based on tissue and soil tests?

I use a garlic based insect control by JH Biotech called BioRepel and use several natural type fungicides on a preventative basis such as the new Soluble Companion

Powder and Actinovate. I also use Fosphite that is described as a reduced hazard fungicide. For Powdery Mildew I use "Mildew Cure". My use of BioGrow Endo Plus Mycorrhizal Fungi, and both granular and soluble RootShield Plus also help with soil borne pathogens.

I have never had a tissue test done I just rely on what feedback I get from observing the plants.

8: What factors do you think contributed the most to your phenomenal success in 2017? Can you walk us through some of your growing techniques / cultural practices?

I think we have our fertilizer Schedule dialed in pretty well and have not made any changes since incorporating the Amino Acid Bio-Activator several years back. I think with the right weather and the right seed, it is capable of growing World Record pumpkins. I think the heated water is important and just try to do each step as well as I can.

9: Joel you have been doing this a long time now and your weights keep going up every year. What are some of the biggest mistakes you've made in this hobby and how have they changed your current practices?

When I started there was no internet and very few growers in this area, so I learned a lot by trial and error. I wouldn't really call them mistakes, because I think I learned something from each trial that didn't work.

10: What advice do you have for growers looking to increase their personal bests in the patch?

Work hard. Learn what you can about Soil Science. Try new things on at least one plant. Experiment and don't be afraid of making mistakes. Think things through, and have a reason for what you are doing.

Also remember growing giant pumpkins is just a hobby and keep it in balance. Family and friends are much more important.

11: What is your favorite seed stock and what seeds out there do you think have the most potential?

The 2,145 McMullen is obviously one of the top bets, but there are plenty of seeds with great potential. I would also encourage growers to plant one of their own seeds and cross it with something really good each season, and in this way develop something special with your name on it.

On behalf of the PNWGPG thank you Joel for the great interview!