

## How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins III

### Rock Rivard – 2001... a dream season

In 2001, Rock set the Québec record with a 1062 pounder – placing him second in Canada that year (3rd all time), and tenth in the world (15th all time).

Who could have predicted such a season? How did he get there? What's his secret? These questions will probably remain unanswered for a long time, but this is what Rock did in 2001.

### In Rock's Own Words

"My 2001 season started in the fall of 2000. A big dumptruck of fresh manure – 15 tons worth – left me with about 6" to 8" of manure over the entire patch. On top of the manure I added about 6" of shredded leaves and tilled everything in.

"On April 28, 2001, the seeds are filed and soaked for about 6 hours, then placed in the germinator. My germinator is a simple plastic

plant starter that I place on a waterbed heater. I plant in 4" peat pots, keep the soil temperature at about 85°, and keep a high level of humidity. About 24 hours later, my season started!

"I spread about 25 lbs. of gypsum, 15 lbs. of Ironite and another 15 lbs. of calcium nitrate on my patch, and then till it all in. I also prepared nutrient pits. These pits are holes dug to about 2' deep and 6' in diameter, then filled with a mixture of bagged sheep manure, shrimp compost, forestry compost, and some home-made compost. The soil removed from the hole is then mounded over the filled nutrient pit. This helps in warming up the soil in early season and with drainage later on.

"Four days after germination, I transferred the seedling into a 12" plastic pot and waited for the arrival of the first true leaf. I wait for the first true leaf so I can determine what direction the main vine will be grow – it always grows opposite the first true leaf.



“On the 6th of May, the seedling is transplanted outside. During transplant, it is very important not to disturb the root system, since it is very fragile. Each of my transplants were protected by mini greenhouses that measured about 8' x 10', and were heated with infrared light bulbs. These huts remained over the plants until they outgrew them in early June.

## May

“May is the longest month of the season (or so it seems), when nothing seems to be happening. However, during May the plant's root system is fully developing and the plant is getting ready to really take off. During this time of the season, overnight protection and watering are the most important things to take care of. The plant will not need much in the way of fertilizer as it will be feeding from the nutrient pit.

## June

“The fun begins in June when the main vine starts growing at incredible rates. The end of May came with the plant having only a dozen leaves, and by mid June, the main vine has stretched to 10' with 3' secondaries. I start burying vines now. I bury vines to favor the development of a secondary root system, and to help anchor the plant against wind. For vine burial, I use a mixture of home-made compost and leaf compost from the local waste recycling program.

“By the end of June, I've been invaded by my arch-enemy, the Cucumber Beetle. These bugs have an enormous appetite and can devour young leaves and whole plants before you realize what's happening. As soon as they arrive, I dust my plants with Sevin, which is very efficient on the bugs and relatively harmless to the plant. The first wave is neutralized, but Cucumber Beetles usually appear in waves – three or four waves during the season depending



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on weather conditions. You can reduce the risk of later waves by completely eliminating the first wave, which I did successfully this year.

### July

“The end of June and the first two weeks of July is an important time for pollination – these weeks are the prime time for pollination. On the 6th of July, I pollinated a flower that would become a 1062 pound pumpkin a few months later. During the pollination period, I pollinate all female blossoms, taking no chance of ending a season without a fruit to weigh.

“From mid to late July, I choose the fruit I will keep on the vines for the remainder of the season. I tend to keep one fruit per plant. To make final selections, I use notes that have tracked each pumpkin’s growth rate. I began removing young fruit, which were not well positioned on the vine, during the second week of July.

“By July 27th, I was down to two pumpkins on the plant when the final choice was made. This is where tracking growth rates is very important, the fruit that I decided on was not the biggest at the time, but was the fastest grower.

“When the fruit starts to really grow, watering becomes extremely important. I keep the moisture level in the soil as constant as possible. Often, fluctuations in soil moisture leads to splits in the fruit or stem. On July 31st, the estimated weight of my pumpkin was 124 pounds.

### August – Wow!

“What a way to jump-start the month. During the first 10 days, the pumpkin gained over 25 lbs. per day! A minor cold wave calmed growth a bit, but once the weather improved, growth was back to 20-25 lbs. a day, with a few days in the 30’s!

“At this point in the season, I stop trying to grow vines and leaves, and concentrate solely

on growing the fruit. I achieve this by terminating all the vine ends. I treat the cut ends with a fungicide and then bury them. Now, the plant’s energy has no where to go except to the fruit. On August 16th the estimated weight of my pumpkin is 556 lbs.

“On July 17th, I recorded the largest weight gain for a single day – 39 lbs., but horror – splits begin to appear on the stem of the pumpkin. The splits are pretty big (about 2" long and 1" deep), and I fear that they will split all the way through to the cavity of the pumpkin. I stop watering to reduce weight gains, and as I expected, growth lessens long enough to allow the splits to heal. Once healed, the fruit resumes growing again at 25+ lbs. per day. A stem split does not always mean the season is over.

“Watering, weeding, and watching are back to normal. The season goes on, but now the cold August nights have come, so I start covering the fruit with a old, thick quilt at night. A fall shelter is built measuring 45' by 24', equipped with infrared light bulbs for heat. This helped, because daily weight gains tapered off slowly. “On August 31st, the estimated weight is 896 lbs. – a 772 pound weight gain for August!

### September

“September is the worst month for a grower with a big pumpkin. By this time of year, the watering, weeding, and insects are no longer major concerns. The plant has started its decline, and apart from trying to resurrect growth with additional fertilizer, all one can do is wait – hoping for the best, but expecting the worst.

“It was a happy ending, though, to an extraordinary season. A 1062 pound pumpkin.”

Incidentally, Rock followed up his 2001, 1062 with a 2002, 1178, and with his insightful growing techniques, the future seems bright for this fun-loving grower from Quebec.