

Brett Hester

Welcome to Brett Hester’s wonderful world of giant pumpkin growing, and equally wonderful worlds of giant squash, giant kohlrabi, giant sunflowers, giant corn, beets and turnips (and anything else giant that anyone competes with). *“Unlock the door to his world with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension - a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You’re moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You’ve just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.”*

from the Twilight Zone

As Brett relates, “The reason I do this crazy thing has changed over the years. Originally it was to be the best, then it was to do better each year, and to honor my grandpa, rest his soul. Now it has gotten to where it should be: for the fun of it. It is not the money, not the newspaper stories, not the TV appearances, not the girls (don’t we wish), that drives one in this sport, but rather a feeling of pride when you stand on stage next to your entry, and say to yourself, ‘I grew that thing!’ What a feeling.”



Brett has spent a lot of time on the stage, and he’s had a lot of wonderful feelings: growing a 42 pound kohlrabi in 1995 which tied the world record; growing a corn stalk over 20’; a sunflower almost 20’. He’s grown a sunflower measuring more than 24” in diameter, and a beet and turnip that weighed 22 and 17 pounds respectively. And, he’s done it all with a sense of urgency to compete, to show himself, to prove he can do it.

Add to this list of “done it,” a 986 pound squash and a 968 pound pumpkin in 2000, and five, 1000+ pound pumpkins and three, 900+ pound pumpkins in 2001 and 2002, and you come away with a picture of a man totally committed to competing with giants.

But, his proudest moment was not one in which he competed for bragging rights.

“In 1997, my grandfather and I worked the entire summer on a project aimed at being recognized as *Champion Gardeners* at our local fair. I even did some baking and hand-stitched a pillow, just so we could qualify for the *King of the Fair* award. On the second day of the fair, before the judging was complete, my grandfather passed away. The next day, I accepted our award as King of the Fair, and as I stood on the stage I felt his presence and knew instantly his joy.”

Brett got into giant pumpkin growing after a neighbor brought a 50 pound pumpkin over to his house in the fall of 1993 and said those fateful words, “Let’s see you and your grandpa beat this.” The next year he grew a 133.5 pound pumpkin and forever claimed the “road” record, but the “smell of bigger fish to fry,” lured him to the WPC weigh off in Oregon where he would be challenged again.

He finished dead last. Far from being discouraged, his failure made him even more determined to return with larger pumpkins in 1995. In 1995 he grew a 627.5 pound pumpkin and two over 500 pounds (respectable weights for their time). In 1996, he bettered his personal best with a 676. 1997 was an off-year, but in 1998 he cracked the 700 pound mark with two pumpkins weighing 720 and 789. In 1999, he bettered his personal best again with a 850.5, but also grew his first competition giant squash at 862.5 pounds. In 2000, he grew a personal best squash of 986 pounds and a personal best pumpkin at 968. In 2001, he grew a pair of 1000 pound pumpkins, and in 2002, a trio of 1000 pound pumpkins (a new personal best of 1063) and a trio of 900 pounders – six pumpkins over 900 pounds in one year – a phenomenal achievement.



In Brett’ Own Words

“I believe, that to be a good grower, it takes more than just good luck; more than just the best seeds, more than the perfect soil and the perfect patch – it takes hard work. I have never been lucky, so I grow 18 plants to compensate for all the bad things that can happen.”



“I work hard all winter to get good seeds from the previous growing season, so that when those seeds prove out, I already have them before their popularity puts them out of my reach. I work hard, spring and fall, to get my soil into the best condition I can. I move, and spread by hand, hundreds of yards of manure, compost, potting soil, pumice, perlite, and anything else I can find to improve the soil. In the summer, I work each plant at least a half an hour a day [that’s 9 hours a day for 18 plants]. I do everything I can to increase my chances of getting lucky – and the harder I work, the luckier I have been.

“I do the basics, but I do them right. I choose about 80% of my seeds for competition based on previous performance, and the other 20% on new seeds with interesting genetics.

“I file and soak my seeds before planting, and I keep my starting chamber at a constant 85° and 85% humidity using sterilized media inoculated with michorrizal fungi. I start my seeds in late April and set them out in early may.

“My cloches are small by comparisons to most, because the weather I experience is nice and warm this time of the year.

“I use very little fertilizer with my young seedlings, but as the plant grows, I increase feeding. I do not have a fertilizing schedule, rather, I watch the plant’s growth rate and color, and when it needs a push here and there, I fertilize.

“I try to set fruit 10'-14' out on the main vine. I look for 5-lobe blossoms, and also pay alot of attention to the angle of the stem to the vine. I set 5-10 fruit on a plant, including sets on side vines, but most are culled within a week’s observation. I keep 2-3 for a while to insure at least one fast grower on a plant.

I prune in the Christmas tree style, but am switching to a rectangle shape this year with a 25' main vine and side vines no longer than 12.5'.

“I watch my plants closely for insect infestations – especially aphids. I keep my patch weed free and neat until September 1st, and suspend weeding after that. I’ve found that I do more damage to late season brittle leaves than the benefits I derive from keeping the patch free from weeds.

“For all you new growers, be ready to learn, be open minded, work your tail off, and don't expect to break the world record your first year.

“And, here’s some things not to do. Do not fail to tie-down your pumpkin in the bed of your truck. If you don’t, it tends to make the bed of your truck a little rounder. [The picture on page xx shows Brett’s truck.] Do not spray *Roundup* or other weed killers on a windy day – you’ll kill more than you bargained for. Do not think you have figured it all out, because when you think you have, you’ll find out just how little you know. Never rest and never be satisfied.

“Never try weeding with a machete [a long knife used by slaves to cut-down sugar cane, and the weapon of choice of all serial killers]. I was cutting brush when I noticed a few weeds in my pumpkin patch. Trying to save time, I marched over to a clump of crabgrass near the stem of a very fast growing 500 pound pumpkin. I reached around the fruit, put the tip of the machete under the crabgrass and lifted. In one slice, I cut through the crabgrass, main vine and stem of the pumpkin – my stomach turned inside out.” *by Brett Hester*

“Leaving Mr. Brett Hester, still shy, quiet, very happy, and apparently in complete control of the *Twilight Zone*.”

from the Twilight Zone

