

Gerry Checkon

I never heard of Spangler, PA, Gerry Checkon, or *Ironite* until October of 1999. That summer, rumors brewed that a PA grower had a pumpkin taping (estimated weight) over 1100 pounds. Later in the summer I heard the name Larry Checkon mentioned, and still later, just two weeks before the world weigh offs, I heard the sad news that he had lost his 1190 pound pumpkin – ending his pursuit of a new world record. Little did I know then that there was another Checkon growing giant pumpkins, and that she would arrive in Altoona, PA on weigh off day with the first pumpkin ever grown over 1100 pounds – a new world record 1131.

I saw pictures of her on the internet, even had a chance to speak with her and Larry on the telephone, but did not get to meet her in person until the International Giant Pumpkin Seminar in the Spring of 2001 at Guelph University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. In a crowded room of men enjoying a hospitality hour the night before the seminar, stood a tiny, diminutive

figure of a woman. Almost lost in the shadows of the towering people around her, I recognized her face immediately, but was absolutely stunned by her size. You'd expect big people to be growing giant pumpkins, but here was the furthest you could stray from any preconceived notion of what a world record giant pumpkin grower should physically resemble. At that moment it became entirely clear to me, the sport of giant pumpkin growing is for everyone. Everyone has an equal chance at succeeding. Size, sex, brawn, or physical energy have little to do with success. Here was a woman that had focused her attention on a pumpkin she called, "Mooney," and despite her husband, Larry's disappointment, finished 1999 in style with a new world record.

Ironite became a hot commodity as a result of Gerry and Larry's testimonial, and if you say that seeds don't matter, don't say that around Gerry. The 1997, 935 Lloyd had been no accidental choice as seed in 1998. The previous

year, Gary Burke of Simcoe, Ontario, Canada had broken the world record with it, resting the record from Paula Zehr, who grew the first 1000 pound pumpkin in 1996 with a 1061. In 1995, three women upset all the men by finishing 1-2-3 in the world (Zehr, Geneva Emmons, and Lorraine Orr). Emmons would go on to better the world mark in 2001 with an astounding 1262 pound pumpkin. Gerry's 1131 filled in the gap in 1999. Since 1996 – six years – women have held three world records, and despite their lower profile and fewer numbers in the sport, have set extraordinary examples as growers of giant pumpkins. Neither size nor sex has anything to do with how good a pumpkin grower you can become.

Ask Gerry Checkon!



Left and right:
Gerry's 1999, 1131
Right inset:
Larry's 1999, 1190

