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Help-to-buy Scheme is Detached From How we Really Live

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Have some fun with the jolly orange giant



Grow for it

A load of squash

Learn to grow and cook pumpkins at Grow HQ's family pumpkin day in Waterford on Sunday, November 13 (Adults: €25, children: €15), from 10am to noon. The day includes a hands-on cookery demonstration and lunch in the cafe; growhq.org. Get the latest scores in the world of giant pumpkins; bigpumpkins.com.



Talking trees

Join Ireland's tree man, Thomas Pakenham, left, on Wednesday, November 8, for an illustrated talk based on his recent book, *The Company of Trees*, which covers his travels to the Himalayas and Patagonia, at Powerscourt Parochial Hall, Enniskerry, in Co Wicklow, sponsored by Enniskerry Gardening Club. €7 for non-members.

Jane digs...

When the Frost is on the Punkin: a dialect poem by Indiana writer James Whitcomb Riley, right, who died 100 years ago and was known as the "Hoosier poet". Stand up tall and declaim it in your best Yankee farm-boy accent. bartleby.com/104/10



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The monster versions can be turned into Halloween lanterns, but why not grow and eat pumpkins, too? Here's how to do it

Don't you love pumpkins? They are the jolly, joke-cracking, tubby men of the garden, overflowing with good-humour and flashy self-importance. Their exaggerated forms are a concentration of autumn's bounty and glowing pigments.

The custom of carving pumpkins – now so much a part of an Irish Halloween – came to this country from America. However, as you probably know, the tradition originated in Ireland, not using pumpkins, but turnips. These were fashioned into jack-o'-lanterns, one of the elements of the Celtic Samhain festival. We lost the practice here at some point and reimported it from across the Atlantic a few decades ago, adopting brighter, shinier pumpkins in place of our own more modest root variety.

I remember my American mother placing a turnip jack-o'-lantern on our window sill in Greystones in the 1970s, and people marvelling at its gruesome features. By that time, this old Irish custom had been forgotten – at least in our Co Wicklow town – and our effort was seen as a weird Yank novelty, as outlandish as the baseball that we played on the manicured lawn of our rented house.

Back in America, there is a new

JANE POWERS GARDENS



pumpkin craze this year, depicting the world's most famous orange man. Just Google "Trump pumpkin carving pattern" and you'll find a stencil to make your own Donald Trumpkin.

The raising of giant pumpkins is another hobby associated with this most magnificent of fruits. (Yes, although we may think of it as a vegetable, it is botanically a fruit, as it grows from a flower.) This year the heaviest so far is a 2,624.6-pounder grown by Belgian man Mathias Willemijns. Pumpkin weights are traditionally

calibrated in pounds; if you think in metric units, that big Belgian beauty is 1,190.5 kilos – about the same weight as two beef cattle, or 19 humans.

Giant-pumpkin growing is a demanding business, you need good seed bred from monster parents, good soil, gallons of water and good weather. In Ireland, you will need a polytunnel, too, to get a bit of extra heat.

So, can you eat them? Apparently, yes, although the flesh is not as flavoursome as that of smaller, less exhibitionist pumpkins. Also, you will need machine tools to cut through the skins.

Because we treat pumpkins as decorative objects, I suspect that most people here don't bother eating them, but what a waste. They can be cooked in numerous ways, none requiring expertise. The easiest is to cut them into halves or quarters, remove the seeds and stringy bits, and roast for between one and two hours, until the flesh is soft all the way through.

Scrape it into a colander, drain off the excess moisture and make into a mash. Add butter, cream, herbs, spices, or whatever you fancy, to give some edge to the sweet pulpiness.

Or make soup, or bake a classic American pumpkin pie. You can also peel the pumpkin, which is fiddly, cut into chunks, parboil or steam the pieces, toss in oil and herbs, and bake on a roasting tray.

There are many orange pumpkins. 'Dill's Atlantic Giant', for instance, has been bred to bear gargantuan fruit, but if you're after a prize-winner, you'll need to

source seed on the internet that has been harvested from champions.

Smaller varieties are more successful in Ireland, especially if you are growing outdoors. They also have denser, more tasty flesh, so it makes sense to grow them. These are often different species (*Cucurbita pepo* and *C. moschata*) from the monster lads (*C. maxima*). All fall under the wider umbrella of winter squash, a group of plants that originated in South and Central America and which have been domesticated for centuries. The Pilgrims in New England famously dined

on pumpkins for their first Thanksgiving and were thereafter indebted to the crop.

All winter squash have long vine-

like stems with tendrils; big floppy leaves with hollow stems, yellow flowers and sculptural-looking fruit. They are eager weed suppressors, so are a useful crop where you have a large area and not a lot of time. There are hundreds of cultivated varieties within the three species. All are tender, thriving in hot summers and dying off when frost hits them.

In this country, seed must be sown indoors with some heat, from mid April to mid May, and the seedlings should not be planted out until all danger of frost has passed (mid May to mid June, depending on your area). Squash like a fertile soil, so add well-rotted manure or compost to the planting hole. They also need plenty of moisture, but not on the leaves, which can cause mildew. Water well every few days, and mulch with straw or dried grass

clippings. This conserves moisture and keeps the fruit clean.

'Jack Be Little' and 'Munchkin' (both *C. pepo*) are pumpkins that you can hold in the palm of your hand. Somewhat larger, and with excellent flavour is 'Uchiki Kuri' (*C. maxima*). This has a radiant orange-red skin, amber flesh and a distinctive shape like a giant onion – which accounts for its other name of red onion squash. It stores well in a cool, frost-free, dry place.

'Crown Prince' (*C. maxima*) is the best of the winter squashes, with delicious orange flesh and great longevity in storage. Its skin is a sophisticated blue-green-grey, more often seen in ceramic glazes than in nature.



Templates for making a 'Donald Trumpkin' can be found online



Help-to-buy scheme is detached from how we really live

The government's help-to-buy scheme, announced in the budget, was rightfully criticised by many people. Various ministers seemed a little surprised, if not a bit tetchy, that few people had rowed in behind their latest genius wheeze.

In research carried out by Davy stockbrokers and the property website myhome.ie, even first-time buyers did not expect a help-to-buy scheme (people are not too easily schmoozed these days).

Two other things flew under the radar when the proposal was announced. First, the silence from retail banks was deafening, which was strange given the allegedly positive response from the Central Bank. It now looks as though the bank was not as "on board" with the plan as ministers made out. (The government's own Housing Agency merely "noted" the scheme in its budget response.)

Second, was the minister for finance's claims on RTE radio that this proposal was targeted at helping first-time buyers buy three-bedroom semi-detached homes on housing estates. Leaving

aside the outdated thinking, and that these houses are coincidentally the most profitable of all housing types to build and sell, there is a glaring hole in the admission. The government's own research shows clearly that a three-bedroom semi-detached house is not the housing type needed in Ireland in 2016.

In 2014, the Housing Agency published research, carried out on its behalf by Future Analytics,

into the country's future housing needs. The report examined how many houses Ireland's urban areas would need. More importantly, it also looked at future household sizes.

The results show that in the Dublin region, where demand is highest, in the next few years 57% of all households will comprise just one and two people. A further 18% will be three-person households. So three-

quarters of all new homes will be needed for households of three people or less.

Reasons for this vary but, for example, we are having fewer babies compared with our parents and grandparents. The 2011 census showed we were having an average of just less than 1.4 children per family – down from two per family in 1991. (Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan are keeping the fertility flag flying at about 2.2 children per family.)

We also have options such as separation and divorce, with the marital break-up rate now running at about 9.7%. Each divorce or separation doubles that family's housing need, but for two smaller households.

Single people are also more likely to live in cities (Leitrim, Mayo and Roscommon have the lowest proportions of single people). This year's census has, for the first time in decades, shown that city centres are growing faster than their surrounding counties. City centres do not need three-bedroom semi-detached houses



As family sizes fall, household sizes shrink and the number of singles rises

either, given the cost of the land on which they would be built.

If the help-to-buy scheme works, most of the new housing that the measure is designed to support will also be built on greenfield sites, thus making it more expensive to develop.

These new households, especially single people with one

income, do not need or want three-bedroom semi-detached homes on housing estates. Our experience in developing new housing estates is poor enough without stimulating more of these types of homes. Common issues include poor design and standards, estates not being taken in charge by local authorities,

limited public transport connectivity and a lack of local and community infrastructure.

The scheme also ignores the reality that, in the next few years, about one-third of all households will be renting – for ever. Instead, it prefers to promote home-ownership, despite the social and economic entails of an over-reliance on home-ownership that are still steaming on the floor.

What should have happened is a targeting of taxpayers' money – if that is what you are going to do – at bringing down the costs of housing rather than inflating the price of housing. When the costs are reduced, more appropriate housing, in terms of size, location and density, can then be made affordable.

So, instead of squaring the circle by finding solutions to why we are not building – or indeed building themselves – the state has circled the square. It has managed to promote the wrong housing types in the wrong locations to households that do not exist in any numbers to justify it. A genius wheeze, indeed.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

