This fall, over 1600 youth from Suwannee County visited the North Florida Research and Education Center-Suwannee Valley east of Live Oak to learn about agriculture and where their food comes from as part of an Ag in the Classroom and Suwannee County 4-H outreach program led by Suwannee County Extension. One of their educational tour stops was “The Pumpkin Patch” at the Center where at least 25 types of pumpkins, winter squashes, and gourds were grown and displayed. The youth learned a lot about pumpkins on their visit, so here are the highlights of the story presented to the youth.

What is a Pumpkin?
A pumpkin is really a type of squash. It is a member of the “Cucurbita” family, which includes squash, cucumbers, watermelon, cantaloupe and gourds. Pumpkins come in just about any color. A blue variety can be found in Eastern Europe and a red variety in the Caribbean! Pumpkins are now grown all over the world on six of the seven continents, with Antarctica being the sole exception. They are even grown in Alaska. The world’s largest pumpkin ever grown weighed well over 1,700 pounds. Florida has very little commercial acreage of larger-sized pumpkins because of the extremely hot and humid conditions here as well as high pest pressure during the fall growing season. However, many of the smaller pumpkins, winter squashes and gourds can be successfully grown in the area.

When we specifically focus on pumpkin in the Cucurbita family, there are actually a number of species (subgroups) that are considered to be a pumpkin.

Cucurbita Moschata – This group includes the pumpkins frequently used for commercially canned pumpkin. They tend to be oblong pumpkins and have tan skin. Other members include: Seminole pumpkin, calabaza or tropical pumpkin, winter crookneck squash, butternut squash, Cushaw squash.

Cucurbita Pepo – These are the Jack-O-Lantern and the cute little pumpkins that fit in the palm of your hand. Other members include: most summer squashes, gourds, Patty pan summer squash, crookneck squash, and zucchini.

Cucurbita Maxima – Whether you consider these to be squash or pumpkins, or any other name, these are the beasts of the pumpkin patch. Members include Prize Winner Hybrid, Big Max, and, of course, the now infamous Atlantic Giant. Other members include: most winter squashes, Hubbard squash, Turban squash, banana squash, and buttercup squash.

The History of Pumpkins
Pumpkins are believed to have originated in Central America. Seeds from related plants were found in Mexico dating back over 7000 years to 5500 B. C. Pumpkins have been grown in America for over 5,000 years, but were completely unknown in Europe.
prior to the first journey to America by Christopher Columbus. In 1584, the French explorer Jacques Cartier reported from Canada that he had found “gros melons”, which was translated in English as “ponpions” or pumpkins. Native Americans used pumpkin as a staple in their diets centuries before the pilgrims landed. Pumpkins and other forms of squash made up one leg of the triad maize, beans, and squash – that once formed the diet of native Americans. When the early settlers arrived, they saw the pumpkins grown by the native Americans and pumpkins soon became a staple in their diets, as well. They also brought seeds back to Europe where they quickly became popular. Just like today, early settlers used pumpkins in a wide variety of recipes from desserts to stews and soups. In addition to cooking with pumpkins, they also dried the shells and cut strips to weave into mats. Early settlers made pumpkin pie by filling a hallowed out shell with milk, honey and spices, then baking it.

The Thanksgiving Connection
We know that pumpkins were a staple of the native Americans long before the arrival of the Pilgrims and that pumpkins have been and continue to be a tradition at the Thanksgiving feast. Not only is it associated with the meal itself, but also, the pumpkin has adorned and decorated homes and communities in honor of this event for hundreds of years.

History of the Jack-O-Lantern
The Irish brought the tradition of the Jack-O-Lantern to America. But, the original Jack-O-Lantern was not a pumpkin. The Irish hollowed out turnips, rutabagas, gourds, potatoes, or beets. They placed a light in them to ward off evil spirits. These were the original Jack-O-Lanterns. In the 1800’s a couple of waves of Irish immigrants came to America. The Irish immigrants quickly discovered that pumpkins were bigger and easier to carve out, so they used pumpkins for Jack-O-Lanterns.

Pumpkins and Your Health
Pumpkins are rich in Vitamin A and potassium and are also high in fiber. The annual per capita consumption of pumpkin in the U.S. today is only 4.5 pounds. American farmers have tripled the planted pumpkin acreage since 1982 to meet rising demand in what is now estimated to be a $150 million per year industry. The rising popularity of urban pumpkin patches and fall festivals has helped spur demand for pumpkins and increased income for some farmers. New varieties of pumpkins are now being grown for their tasty seed and are being used in puffed snack products, granola products, trail mixes, sandwich spread, and specialized oil. Pumpkin seeds are cholesterol free and loaded with vitamins and minerals. Pumpkin seeds are rich in protein and unsaturated oil and contain significant zinc, potassium, and phosphorous.