

CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Don't toss your pumpkin after Halloween. Do this instead.

When pumpkins rot in landfills, they release planet-warming methane. This year after Halloween, try composting, pumpkin smashing or donating to a farm or zoo.

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Every year, Americans buy tens of millions of decorative pumpkins to carve, paint and display for Halloween. When you throw those pumpkins out, they wind up in the landfill, where they rot and release methane, an extra-powerful planet-warming gas.

How scary might those pumpkin emissions be?

In 2022, the United States harvested about 2 billion pounds of pumpkins destined to be sold whole (not processed, canned or made into pie or bread) according to data from the Agriculture Department. Assuming those pumpkins eventually made their way to a landfill, they would release about 7,500 tons of methane, according to Robert Czubaszek, an environmental scientist at the Bialystok University of Technology in Poland. That's the greenhouse gas equivalent of more than 45,000 cars, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

But there are better — and more fun — ways to dispose of your jack-o-lanterns this year. You can compost them, smash them or feed them to farm animals, so long as you haven't doused your pumpkins in bleach or paint.

Compost your own pumpkin

If you have a yard or a garden plot, you can compost your pumpkin and give your soil an extra boost for spring planting.

Composted pumpkins, which are broken down by oxygen-loving bacteria, release very little methane. Emissions are much higher when pumpkins get sealed off without oxygen inside of landfills, where a different type of bacteria digest food and burp out methane.

Pumpkins are about 90 percent water, so they break down very quickly, according to Beverly Jaszczurowski, the chief operating officer of Scarce, an Illinois-based environmental nonprofit. Good compost relies on a mix of wet and dry ingredients, so watery pumpkins are a good companion for the crunchy fall leaves many people compost this time of year.

To speed things along, you can cut your pumpkin into pieces or smash it with a bat. “You’re starting the process of breaking it down,” Jaszczurowski said.

But beware: You should remove the seeds before composting or you might find a pumpkin patch sprouting up in your garden. You should also remove adornments such as googly eyes or any bits of wax from melted candles because these won’t break down.

Go nuts at a pumpkin smash

If you don’t have a yard, you can still make sure your pumpkin gets composted.

Some local governments and nonprofits organize compost collections for pumpkins after Halloween. Around D.C., a nonprofit called Pumpkins for the People organizes pickups.

Volunteers may also organize a “pumpkin smash” where neighbors find creative ways to break down their old jack-o-lanterns and drop them off at a composting facility or a farmer’s field.

Some people smash pumpkins into fields with bats and sledgehammers. Others drop them from towers or roll them down giant ramps. At least one group of university students flings them from a homemade catapult.

Scarce, Jaszczurowski’s nonprofit, organized pumpkin smashes in 95 places last year. She said they collected at least 241 tons of pumpkins.

You can check the group’s website to see if there’s a pumpkin smash near you — and if not, you can organize one yourself, Jaszczurowski said. Scarce has a detailed guide on how to host a pumpkin smash, but it urges people to check with their local governments first to make sure they’re allowed. (Illinois legislators had to change a state law to allow Scarce to host its first pumpkin smash in 2014, she said.)

Feed your pumpkin to a pig (or a giraffe)

Finally, you can donate your pumpkin to serve as animal feed at a farm or even your local zoo.

After every Halloween, some zoos collect pumpkins and feed them to animals such as giraffes and elephants. Farmers also collect pumpkins to feed chickens, sheep, goats, cattle and pigs.

The nonprofit Pumpkins for Pigs connects people with farms and animal sanctuaries in 600 locations in the United States and Canada. You can check their website to [find a site near you](#) — or sign up to [receive donated pumpkins](#) or [organize a pickup in your area](#).

For the health of the animals, the organization asks that you don't donate pumpkins with acrylic paint, rhinestones or other inedible decorations. Water-based paints, markers and glues are okay.

“Some people actually use Clorox to preserve a carved pumpkin,” said Jennifer Seifert, who founded Pumpkins for Pigs. “Don't do that because that makes it toxic. You can use vinegar.”

Should you leave your pumpkins out for wildlife?

If you leave your pumpkins out for long enough, squirrels and other critters will probably start to nibble on them. But some public officials have discouraged people from trying to feed their pumpkins to wildlife.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife agency warned that [pumpkins could attract bears](#) looking to pack on pounds before hibernating, or lure deer that will draw mountain lions into neighborhoods.

“We want our wildlife to be sustained by the resources that naturally occur in their habitat,” Karen Fox, a wildlife pathologist for the agency, wrote in a statement. “Our policy is definitely to not provide supplemental food to big game in any form.”