



## Lifestyle

# The fine art of raising gigantic pumpkins

Attorney Ryan Osterholm gears up for another growing season

By Doug Hovelson  
Special to Minnesota Lawyer

Whenever there's a major outbreak of waterborne or foodborne illness in the country, it's Ryan Osterholm who often gets the call if the aggrieved parties need a plaintiff's lawyer to represent them. Since joining the Minneapolis-based Pritzker-Hageman law firm in 2009, Osterholm has focused exclusively on helping people infected by foodborne illnesses, such as E. coli, and waterborne diseases such as Legionnaire's disease, get recompensed through the legal system for their suffering and losses.

He might be the most experienced foodborne lawyer in the country. His work has earned him a partnership at the law firm, and garnered him national media attention for his expertise in food law. He is a seri-



STAFF PHOTO: BILL KLOTZ  
Ryan Osterholm, an attorney at Pritzker Hageman, holds a handful of pumpkin seeds he'll be planting soon.

ous lawyer, with a serious mission and a growing reputation for the quality of his work. That's all to the good, but what really sets him apart — and causes fellow attorneys that he's worked with from around the country to contact him for seasonal progress updates — is his Rabelaisian approach to backyard gardening.

Osterholm grows giant pumpkins, one per annum, in his suburban backyard.

Pumpkins so large that it takes a football team to pick them up. Pumpkins that, if properly trimmed out for Halloween and then airlifted into Madison, Wisconsin, would make even that Halloween-happy city stop and take notice.

He includes a picture of one of his October show-stoppers on his online profile page at work. It gets a lot of attention. People love to see giant pumpkins, such as those that go on display at the Minnesota State Fair every year. But the State Fair stunners are mere mortals, compared to what Osterholm produces in his backyard. "The State Fair is actually a little too early to harvest," he says. "I can get hundreds of pounds of growth after the State Fair and on into the fall."

He grew a 950-pounder a couple of years back. A colleague at work

helped out that year, by dropping off a load of manure from her horse farm at his house. Mixed into the soil, the horsey contribution really got things growing. "Once they get the horsepower," he says, "pumpkins really take off."

He saw growth of 30-40 pounds a day at peak growing time last year.

"You notice [the astonishing growth] when the pumpkin's the size of a basketball, and then you leave for the cabin for a weekend or something, and when you come back, it's doubled in size," says Osterholm.

### It all starts in a warm oven

The road to Halloween glory at the Ryan Osterholm household begins in early spring, when the Minneapolis attorney-cum-pumpkin whisperer inserts a hand-selected assortment of winter-rested seeds into the kitchen oven.

After a night of what might pass for pumpkin seed revelry, Osterholm optimistically hopes to find a dozen or more sporty seeds to have germinated within the balmy confines of the cookery appliance. The seeds, you see, spend the night bathed in 85-90 degree heat, generated solely by the interior oven light.

"The oven light provides enough heat for the seeds to germinate," Osterholm reports. The goal is not to bake the seeds, which are not much edible in any case, but to jump-start them from out of their state of vegetative stasis and into the world of the living.

A few stragglers won't survive the night, dying before they even sprout a vine. The hardier types move to the basement, where they are plunged into earth-filled pots with the expectation that they will sprout and prosper under the warm glow of a battery of sun lights. Like any good northern gardener, Osterholm strives to give his plants a head start on the outdoor growing season.

Experience counts, too. Osterholm started growing jumbo pumpkins about 10 years ago — shortly after the family moved to St. Louis Park. The house had a garden, and the garden looked promising, from the pumpkin-growing point of view.

"I went on the internet and got some seeds," says Osterholm. He seized on some Atlantic Giants, a variety known for its brilliant Halloween orange coloring. He got some help getting going from the St. Croix Growers Association, a self-described giant pumpkin and veggie club with members in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Even so, those early years were tough. Pests and pestilence beset him.

Squash vine borers got the better of him in year one.

"The next year, I had a prevention plan in place for the borers, and

then had a really bad powdery mildew — a fungus — that stunted the plants' growth," he says. "I learned how to control that and in the third year, I got a 500-pound pumpkin."

Deer and rabbits pose a constant threat as well. A peppermint oil spray wards them off to some extent. The Great Dane that now resides at the Osterholm home does an even better job of keeping the wild critters at bay.

Of those early seasons, he says, "My wife thought I was nuts." And then came the investment: heating coils for the garden soil, to keep the pumpkins warm and toasty in those cool Minnesota spring nights; mini-greenhouses, coupled by PVC piping to the watering system, to protect the newly sprouted seedlings from the grim reaper thrust of Jack Frost (pumpkins wither and die at the first breath of a frost). A pumpkin-toting tarp (really, a tarp made with heavy duty stitching expressly designed for lifting giant pumpkins, available online of course). A gas tiller, for preparing the soil in advance of the growing season. Fertilizers of various types. And water, water, water, and more water. He installed a drip tubing system for irrigation.

"Every year, my wife says, 'Let's talk about your pumpkin budget,'" he says. However those talks go, the budget ultimately gets green-lighted for another season.

Initially skeptical, his wife, Monica, has become a "reluctant supporter," Osterholm says. Case in point: Last summer, a June hailstorm struck a near-fatal blow to his fledgling giant. "It looked like somebody took a shotgun to it," Osterholm says of his hail-struck plant. The hail tattooed the leaves and severed the main bud. Disheartened, Osterholm considered throwing in the towel for the season, but his wife would have none of it.

"She kind of talked me out of it," he says. People were depending on him to produce another giant, she reminded him — people such as the neighborhood kids, who would sorely miss seeing their jolly orange giant jack-o'-lantern on Halloween. "You've got to grow it," she said.

Back to the garden he went, and with some careful pruning, propping and pleading, he coaxed the pumpkin back to life.

Geography is destiny  
Pumpkins thrive on long hours of sunshine, just so long as it's not too hot. That makes Minnesota, and the Upper Midwest, prime country for growing giant pumpkins. Geographically, the 45th parallel north on the global latitude scale is the sweet spot, Osterholm says — and Minnesota is a 45th parallel state.

"The summer days here are long. Southerners have more heat, but the days are shorter — and pump-



SUBMITTED PHOTO  
Ryan Osterholm, right, sits on a past year's giant pumpkin with his wife, Monica, and son, Ethan.

kins don't tolerate high heat well. Canadians have longer days, but cooler weather," he explains. They also use greenhouses, a practice that generates some controversy within world competitive pumpkin-growing circles, he says.

Meanwhile the Europeans, late-comers to the game, are now coming on strong. The current world record holder for the largest pumpkin ever grown, a whopping 2,624-pounder according to the Washington Post, is a Belgian.

The Upper Midwest is a hotbed of competitive pumpkin-growing. Some growers put five or six pumpkins in the ground at one time, Osterholm says, with the hope of producing a world-record whopper. They can push their pumpkins to the limit, too, risking the occasional water-fueled explosion. Pumpkins know no bounds, when it comes to slaking their thirst for water, Osterholm explains. Left to their own devices, pumpkins absorb as much water as is available to them. Missing a shut-off valve, they drink until they explode.

Water fuels their phenomenal mid-summer growth. A well-watered giant can grow by 50-60 pounds a day, which is actually what the math calls for if the goal is to raise a 2,000-pounder. Such behemoths are well beyond the grasp of a land-constrained suburban householder such as Osterholm.

"I could never grow a world-class pumpkin where I live now," he says. Not, certainly, without taking out a neighboring yard or two. Even with his more modest giant-growing goals, pumpkin sprawl is an ever-present concern. Last year's pumpkin weighed in at 800 pounds, occupying a vast swath of the Osterholms' backyard and even nosing its way into a neighbor's garden. (The neighbor, a fellow lawyer, good-naturedly shrugged off the intrusion, according to Osterholm.)

The 800-pound orange creeper spread itself large, measuring 60-foot long, and 8-10-feet wide, by mid-October.

It was a good growing season.

### Hello, Halloween.

Pumpkin pie, one might think, would be a staple of the Osterholm household diet throughout the year. But Osterholm has a better idea: With the aid of his trusty pumpkin tarp, he lugs, somehow, the pumpkins around the house and into

the front yard. Two years ago, he talked the Benilde-St. Margaret high school football team into giving him a hand. The boys tackled the job with acumen, he reports. They then went on to win a state championship that fall. Last year, they neither helped out in the pumpkin patch nor did they win a championship. They might take note, Osterholm suggests.

In any case, after contriving to relocate the pumpkin in the front yard, he carves it into a Halloween jack-o'-lantern and there it sits, flashing its toothy grin, under the autumnal skies. Unless a wandering deer gets wind of it, as happens, and digs in for a feast. If the deer can only wait, Osterholm is only too happy to cut them in: as the coup de grace to every season, he chops the pumpkin up into wheel barrow-sized chunks, and wheels them into the nearby woods for final disposal. The deer make short work of the remains.

The giants aren't really humanly edible anyway. "They're not raised quite organically," Osterholm says.

The seeds of his slightly obsessive pursuit of pumpkin abundance were planted in his youth, Osterholm says. "I always had this curiosity as a kid about giant pumpkins," he says, said interest fueled by regular visits to the halls of agricultural cornucopia at the Minnesota State Fair. "I had seen the giant pumpkins at the state fair. And Halloween has always been my favorite holiday," he allows.

Whether by chance or instinct, the Edina-born Osterholm attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his undergraduate studies. "Halloween is always huge in Madison," says Osterholm. "People come from all over for it."

Everyone in the neighborhood comes by to look when Osterholm rolls his annual giant into the front yard. "I'm known for the pumpkins," he says.

A new growing season beckons, and Osterholm has his seeds, hand-harvested from last year's product, at the ready. Will he go for a new personal best in 2018? Perhaps aim to cross the 1,000-pound threshold? Will nature cooperate? Will his wife demand a stricter accounting for his pumpkin budget?

Keep your ear to the ground.