

off the lip

# Good gourd!

**EDDIE GIARUSSO, 72 | Competitive pumpkin farmer**

To be in peak shape for competition, 72-year-old Eddie Giarusso starts working at dawn every morning and takes great care to hydrate properly. His wife, Rose, meticulously records the nutritious food he prepares, even plans ahead for him on a calendar. This year, the Prudence Island resident will break his own record. The competitive giant pumpkin grower's previous personal best was a 1,108-pounder, which took fourth place in the 2006 Southern New England Giant Pumpkin Growers competition at Frerichs Farm in Warren. Now he has two pumpkins about to surpass his personal best; the largest — estimated at 1,166 pounds and growing — is almost 1,000 pounds heavier than the first pumpkin he grew in 1997. The Providence native is looking forward to competing at Frerichs Farm again Saturday, Oct. 9, when the official weight will be determined. You can predict by the size, Giarusso says with excitement in his eyes, but you never know until it's on the scale. **BY BRE EATON**

## What made you first interested in competitive pumpkin growing?

There was a fella here on the island, John Canario, and he used to grow pumpkins. To me they were monsters — maybe 300-400 pounds. He would never give me a seed. So one day in the paper my wife sees this ad that says John Castellucci was having a seed starting party, so Rose and I went. Met a few guys, bought a couple raffle tickets and won some seeds. Then I joined the Rhode Island organization (now they're also members of the Southern New England Giant Pumpkin Growers Association) got friendly with a few people from Ohio and even Italy now.

## Do most people share their seeds?

A friend of mine, Joe Jutras, he's a well-known pumpkin grower. He held the world record for two years — 1,689 pounds. And not last year but the year before, he gave Christy Harp, a schoolteacher in Ohio, one of his 1,385 seeds (*from a pumpkin Jutras grew that weighed 1,385 pounds*), and she broke his record with 1,725!

## What about you? Do you share yours?

A friend's son, Zachary Turillo from Jamestown, he's 10 years old. We talked about the pumpkins last year, and so this year I gave him a little plant. Well, I'll tell ya'. He takes care of that plant. He calls me Pumpkin Eddie, and he calls me if he's having a little problem, and I tell him what he should do. That pumpkin is about maybe 350, 400 pounds. Rose told him that the first pumpkin I ever grew was only 250 pounds. He said he kicked my butt!

## What's the biggest pumpkin you've had so far?

1,108 pounds.

## What about this year?

It's estimated at 1,166 pounds. But you never know until it hits the scale and we hope it weighs more than that.

## How much time do you have to spend in the garden?

When the pumpkins are growing, I'm usually out there in the morning at 5:30 'til about 9 a.m. That's why my wife says I'm crazy! (*Smiles.*)

## I kill everything I try to grow. How do you do it?

After filling the edges of the seeds and soaking them, we start the seeds in an incubator. Then we put them in the ground around May 20 or 22. Somewhere around there. And these pumpkins out here ... (*opening the entrance to the gated pumpkin patch and pointing to two humongous pumpkins still growing inside*) ... were all pollinated the end of June. So these pumpkins (he estimates both are more than 1,100 pounds) are not even 90 days old!

## You pollinate them yourself. Why?

So we can know the genetics for sure. See this pumpkin here, see that sign (*points to sign that hangs on the fence above the vine*) says 1,161 Rodonis? That's the fella that gave me the seed from the pumpkin he grew. Just like that one there, the 985 Werner; and that's the seed that grew that pumpkin (*points to a huge orange and green pumpkin in his truckbed.*) Didn't do much — estimated at 750 pounds. That's the baby! (*Chuckles.*)



**Wonder on the vine.** Eddie Giarusso, with his personal best — a nearly 1,200-pound pumpkin, is prepping for the competition at the Giant Pumpkin Weigh-Off in Warren Saturday, Oct. 9. PHOTO BY SUE STEVENSON

## How do you move them?

It's a lot of work. We'll actually push the pumpkin up on one side, put a tarp under it and then drop it. Then lift the other side and pull the tarp through. The tarp has handles on it. Then you just move it to the truck. (*He models lifting the handles up a foot or so off the ground and stutter stepping.*) For this (*the 1,100-pounder*), you'd need 10 to 12 guys. (*With the help of previous World Record holder Joe Jutras, he recently devised a pulley system that makes the process much easier.*)

## What's the biggest challenge you face?

The biggest challenge is disease, and you know, I had a pumpkin right here, you see this spot. (*He points to the ground — a bare circular imprint in the soil large enough for two people to sit cross-legged.*) What happened there, remember when we had the big rain? That's what we fear. When we get a lot of rain, these suck in a lot of water. Then two to three days after the rain, stuff starts to dry out, and the blossom end just got a little split right down the middle. It stopped, but what happened is that it opened into the cavity, all the way in. I poked it with a stick and it went all the way in. If you got a little split

that doesn't reach the cavity, the pumpkin would still be good for competition. But once even a little hole goes all the way through the rind and into the cavity, you can't use it.

## What do you do with the pumpkin after the weigh-off? Make a thousand pumpkin pies?

No. It's too mealy. And we use too many chemicals.

## Will you share any of your secrets? How do they get so big?

There's no secret. There's a lot of fertilizers. We use a lot of fish and seaweed. Potassium, manganese. There's a long list of stuff we put in the soil before we even start, then there's stuff we put on daily. People have asked me what I feed 'em, and I'll say, "Beer!" ... I was drinking this awful, cheep beer one summer, and I was getting some awful pain, so I went to the doctor. My liver was building up fatty content, so he says, "You gotta quit drinkin'!" I said, "Oh, I gotta go the whole summer without drinkin'?" So then I bought two cases of non-alcoholic beer. I drank a can and it was awful! There was hops and stuff in there, so I gave it to the pumpkins! Every day I'd give 'em a couple cans a beer! (*Laughs.*) Now I say it as a joke, but

that summer I really did. I didn't get any big pumpkins out of it!

## Why do you love this hobby?

It's challenging.

## As the big Weigh-off at Frerichs Farm approaches, does competition get fierce? Any spying? Gags? Sabotage?

They do it as a joke. We have this guy Norm, he lives in Johnston. He's a character. He'll put pictures of other people's pumpkins up on the Internet, but he won't tell you where he was. He calls them spy missions. But we look around the picture to see a barn or something, then we can recognize whose pumpkin it is. We've met a lot of nice people doing this hobby. It's all fun.

**e** The Southern New England Giant Pumpkin Grower's Annual Weigh-off takes place Saturday, Oct. 9, from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. at Frerichs Farm, 43 Kinnicutt Ave., Warren. Music by The Whippets 9 a.m.-noon. Pumpkin drop at 11:30 a.m. Weigh-off starts at noon. Free admission. Parking fee \$5. (401) 245-8245. [www.frerichsfarm.com](http://www.frerichsfarm.com).