

# The Gazette 2

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**Jeneralizations 3**  
Jen Chaney considers TV's new weekly catharsis for women



**Child's Play 7**  
New! JoAnn Grbach finds fun things to do with tots to 10-year-olds

# PUMPKIN!

It's the time of year when kids of all ages jump in the hay and shout 'Oh my gourd!'



Great! Pumpkin! (Above) Isabella Banks (front) and sister Emma get their hands on a pumpkin at Homestead Farm in Poolesville. (Right) Henry Daschel defies the laws of physics trying to pick up a pumpkin that's gi-normous

Photos by Stacy Zarin/Special to The Gazette

by **Chris Slattery**  
Staff Writer

"They love the pumpkins," Jean Phillips says. She has run Phillips Farm and Produce since 1990, but her maiden name — King — marks her as real rural royalty.

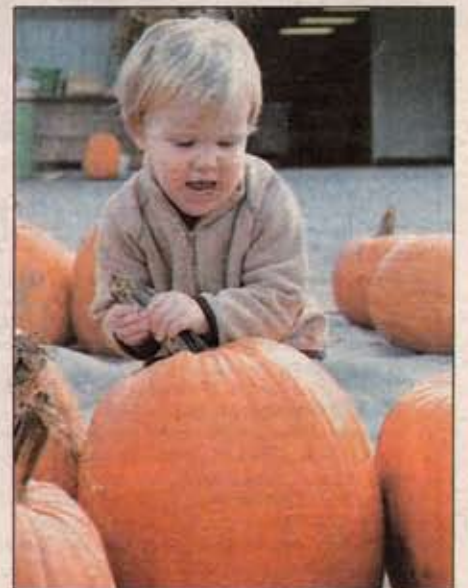
"My family's been in Montgomery County since it was Frederick County," she says. "We are Maryland to the core. I can trace 'em all back to the 17th century."

That's impressive for a human, but Phillips is but a blow-in by pumpkin standards. The gorgeous globular gourds are believed to have originated in Central America, and seeds have been found in Mexico that date back to 5500 B.C.

Centuries before the Pilgrims arrived in 1620 (they beat Phillips' ancestors by a mere 30 years), Native Americans were growing and eating the orange orbs. And European settlers were quick to get in on the action, using pumpkin pulp for stews and soups, drying the shells to weave into sturdy mats and baking the earliest pumpkin pies. They even sent the seeds back east to their homelands.

Can you imagine the gossip 'round the water well? "Nathaniel and Prudence sail all the way to the New World — and all we get are these lousy pumpkin seeds!"

See **Pumpkins**, page B-11



**Arts 4**  
Octogenarian's work on view at Strathmore

**Dining 12**  
Walnut Hill welcomes Thai Jasmine Bistro

**Celebrations 16**  
Weddings, engagements, anniversaries and births

**School News 24**  
News and notes from your local schools

**Advice From the Pros 22**  
**Youth Press 23**  
**Service 25**  
**Meeting Place 30**

# Very gourd: Montgomery rolls out its great pumpkins

## PUMPKINS

Continued from B-1

### Crop rotation

When he was 10, Ben Allnutt says, he and his dad would drive down to Westmoreland Circle to sell corn and tomatoes in the city. Now the city comes to him, rolling down the long, narrow country road that leads to Homestead Farm.

"We just finished harvesting apples," he reports. "Except for the really intrepid pickers. Soon it will be time to [fix things]. The farm gets a little threadbare after so many visitors. Then it'll be Christmas trees. ... That gives us a chance to get to know our spouses again!"

But the penultimate event on the farm calendar is pumpkin picking time, and nothing pleases the farmer more than seeing families making the pumpkin pilgrimage to Poolesville on a beautiful autumn day.

"Part of the beauty of it is the tradition," says Allnutt, whose family has farmed this heavenly corner of Montgomery County since 1763. That's when James Allnutt of Calvert County bought 746 acres of land along Seneca Creek, 230 acres of which now constitute Homestead Farm.

Halloween, he says, "is a kids' holiday. You get to do things with your family."

And some of the things that can be done at Homestead Farm are hayrides out to the pumpkin patch, where Allnutt says it's fun to watch the little ones' eyes light up.

"They just think of running to them," he says. "And then they trip over the pumpkin vines, but they get right up, brush off the dirt and go to the pumpkins again."

For farmers like the Allnutts — Ben and his wife Maureen have taken over operations from his dad, 83-year-old Ben Sr. — farming is a matter of sorting out the seasons.

"It's harvest season, the culmination of the whole year," he explains. "Everything but pumpkins is picked — but we're busy with people."

So busy that it takes a crew of "really good helpers" to keep things going in the run-up to November.

"It's not just me and my family," says Allnutt. "It's a group effort. We're hosting a big party, basically."

### Gourd almighty!

It's a party to which pretty much everyone is invited. Allnutt says he's had a bumper crop of crowds this year.

"Huge crowds," he says. "Lots of people, beautiful weather — it's been incredibly busy. Pumpkins, pumpkins, pumpkins."

Sometimes, visitors to Homestead Farm can get territorial, which is understandable considering the unabashed beauty of the place and its unobstructed views.

"A couple of people said 'What are these people doing on my farm,'" Allnutt chuckles.

It's a phenomenon that's seen around the county, this tendency of city folk to cherish the farms they visit mostly on autumn weekends.

### They'll pump you up

**Butler's Orchard**  
22200 Davis Mill Road  
Germantown  
301-972-3299  
www.butlersorchard.com

**Homestead Farm**  
15600 Sugarland Road  
Poolesville  
301-977-3761  
www.homestead-farm.net

**Phillips Farm**  
13710 Shaeffer Road  
Germantown  
301-540-2364  
www.phillipsfarmproduce.com



"I think everybody romanticizes what farming life is like," says Phillips. "If only they knew!"

Farming is part good old-fashioned hard work, part worry about modern woes from taxes to tort reform. But it's the visitors — even the ones who are naive about the sometimes harsh realities of farm life — who make it worthwhile.

"Most kids are wide-eyed with the animals," Phillips says, noting that visitors to her farm can enjoy the pumpkin patch and hayrides plus a petting zoo and weekend pony rides.

"They love the animals. The goats take the feed right out of their hands, and kids love that. Their eyes get as big as saucers."

Children's eyes are not all that grows on pumpkin farms.

According to the Maryland Agricultural Statistics Service, Maryland farmers harvested 1,400 acres of pumpkins with a total yield of 1.26 million pounds valued at \$1.89 million last year. And the Maryland Department of Agriculture says a 389-pound pumpkin at the 2003 Anne Arundel County Fair may have set a new unofficial largest pumpkin record in the state.

But there's always next year.

### Fall in

Todd Butler doesn't need his TV Guide to tell him about the football schedule.

"You can tell when the Redskins are playing at 1 o'clock," says Butler. (He said a little bit more about the



Photos by Stacy Zarin/Special to The Gazette

Sweet as pie: Audry Dubic pairs a pumpkin with a smile; Stephanie Manning (left) relaxes in the patch.

"Skins, but let's not go into that, except to observe that it's remotely possible they won't be impacting anyone's Christmas tree purchasing schedule.)

The Butlers have been farming these Maryland foothills for 54 years since George and Shirley Butler "started it fresh out of college."

"We were a wholesale peach farm," Butler says. "Then in the '70s, we put in 35 acres of pick-your-own strawberries. People would be in a line a mile long."

Times have changed, though, and instead of strawberry seekers, the Butlers gear up for pumpkin pickers — many of them children and grandchildren of strawberry seekers.

"Because we've been here long enough, a lot of people bring their kids because their parents brought them," Butler says. "It's the fastest

growing holiday. That's what the trade papers say."

Like Allnutt and Phillips, Butler understands his customers' yearning for a simpler time, and wants his place to satisfy them.

"A lot of people come to the farm. They want the experience," he says.

For him, though, "It's just another reason to decorate."

That means hay bales and corn stalks — and pumpkins, of course.

"I don't care about the presents at Christmas time," Butler admits. "I care about the decorations, the lights — the Festival of Lights in the (nearby Seneca Creek State) park."

But that's a diversion for another season. These final days of October are a time to enjoy the last fruits of the harvest — and the last golden days of the year.

"Spring sometimes blows by you

in three days," Butler observes. "In the fall, so many of the days have bright sunshine and balmy temperatures. ... It's such a nice time."

And the best way to take advantage is to come with little children during the week, bring the whole family on weekends or plan an evening hayride complete with bring-your-own s'mores. All three farms can accommodate birthday parties, scout troops — even a homeowner's association, according to Phillips, who fondly recalls a recent visit by a smaller-than-usual group of disabled children.

Butler's features live music and food vendors on the weekend, and Phillips' boasts a half-mile of trail in its acre-large maze. As for Allnutt, he welcomes every visitor to his beautiful farm — as long as they take care not to trample on "my most precious possession, my joy."