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Put Your Old Jack-O-Lanterns to Good Use with Pumpkins for Pigs

This Leesburg-based nonprofit works to reduce food waste by donating unwanted pumpkins and other materials to area farms for animal feed.

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Instead of letting old pumpkins left over from Halloween decorations go to a landfill, one Northern Virginia-based organization is working to put that produce to good work by feeding it to pigs. And goats. And sometimes llamas.

Through [Pumpkins for Pigs](#), people can choose to donate clean, non-moldy produce — like pumpkins, gourds, and hay bales — to area farms, where the otherwise unused materials are fed to animals. Doing this reduces food waste, provides valuable nutrients for animals, and helps reduce carbon emissions by keeping food out of landfills.

Plus, founder and CEO Jennifer Seifert says, “It gives us an opportunity to connect back to the community in which we live that produces the food that we eat.”

The organization began in 2017, when Seifert asked farmers in the Loudoun County area if they had a use for her unwanted Halloween decorations. When they expressed interest, she began to expand the idea, helping them set up collection sites where the community could drop off donations. What started as 10 donation sites has grown to 600 across the U.S. and Canada.

“People are willing to take the extra time at this busy time of year to make an effort to reduce that food waste by taking it to these donation sites,” she says.

In 2023, the organization diverted an estimated 800 pounds of food, which prevented about 334 pounds of CO2 from being created, Seifert says.



There are around 600 donation sites across the U.S. and Canada. (Courtesy Pumpkins For Pigs Foundation)

How to Donate

Users looking to donate can find a drop-off site on Pumpkins for Pigs' website. Each center has a list of what they can accept and other guidelines like what hours they can accept donations and if you need to call ahead.

Since the donations need to be safe to eat for the animals, there are some rules about [what can and cannot be donated](#).

"Anything that uses water-based paints that can be washed off, or water-based glues, tissue paper, all those things can be removed and are not toxic. If you chose to try to preserve a carved pumpkin with vinegar, then that is also fine," Seifert says. "But if you have glitter on there, or you have gemstones and you can't get them off, then those should probably go to a composter." Items with mold also cannot be donated for feed.

In addition to the regular donation sites, Pumpkins for Pigs often hosts donation events at farmers markets and other community gatherings. Updates on when to find events are available on the [organization's website](#) and [Instagram](#).



Goats chow down on a donated evergreen tree at 56 Hooves in Loudoun County. (Courtesy 56 Hooves)

Not Just for Halloween

This operation isn't just jack-o-lanterns and fall materials. You can also donate more wintry items like old Christmas trees, garlands, and wreaths. These kinds of fall and winter donations can be accepted through January 31.

During the summer, the organization takes donations of excess home-grown produce. So, if you were overzealous planting your backyard vegetable garden and end up with more zucchini than you can eat, you can drop it off for the animals. Excess backyard garden donations run from July 1 to October 31.

Plus, Seifert says the group also works with food pantries to redirect their excess food, such as food scraps, to donation sites as well. Food pantry donations are open year-round.



Courtesy Pumpkins For Pigs Foundation

Now Composting

In addition to those three key collection areas, composting is a new initiative Pumpkins for Pigs is taking on this year. In the case that your pumpkins have started to decompose a little too quickly (you can thank the unseasonal heat for that) and have begun to mold, you can still put them to use in a compost pile.

"We need to be able to find another solution for folks, because a lot of states still do not have compost solutions, and not every city or town or county even has it," Seifert says. "So we want to provide alternative solutions where [if] it's not viable for feed, then our next option is compost."

There are only a few compost sites this year, as many farms don't have the capacity to take on that much extra material, but Seifert says the organization is working to continue spreading the word and expanding its reach.

"Help us make a difference," she says. "Every person has the opportunity to reduce food waste, and it's really easy right now."

Feature image courtesy Piggins and Banks Pig and Animal Sanctuary