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LOCALS GONE TO THE DOGS

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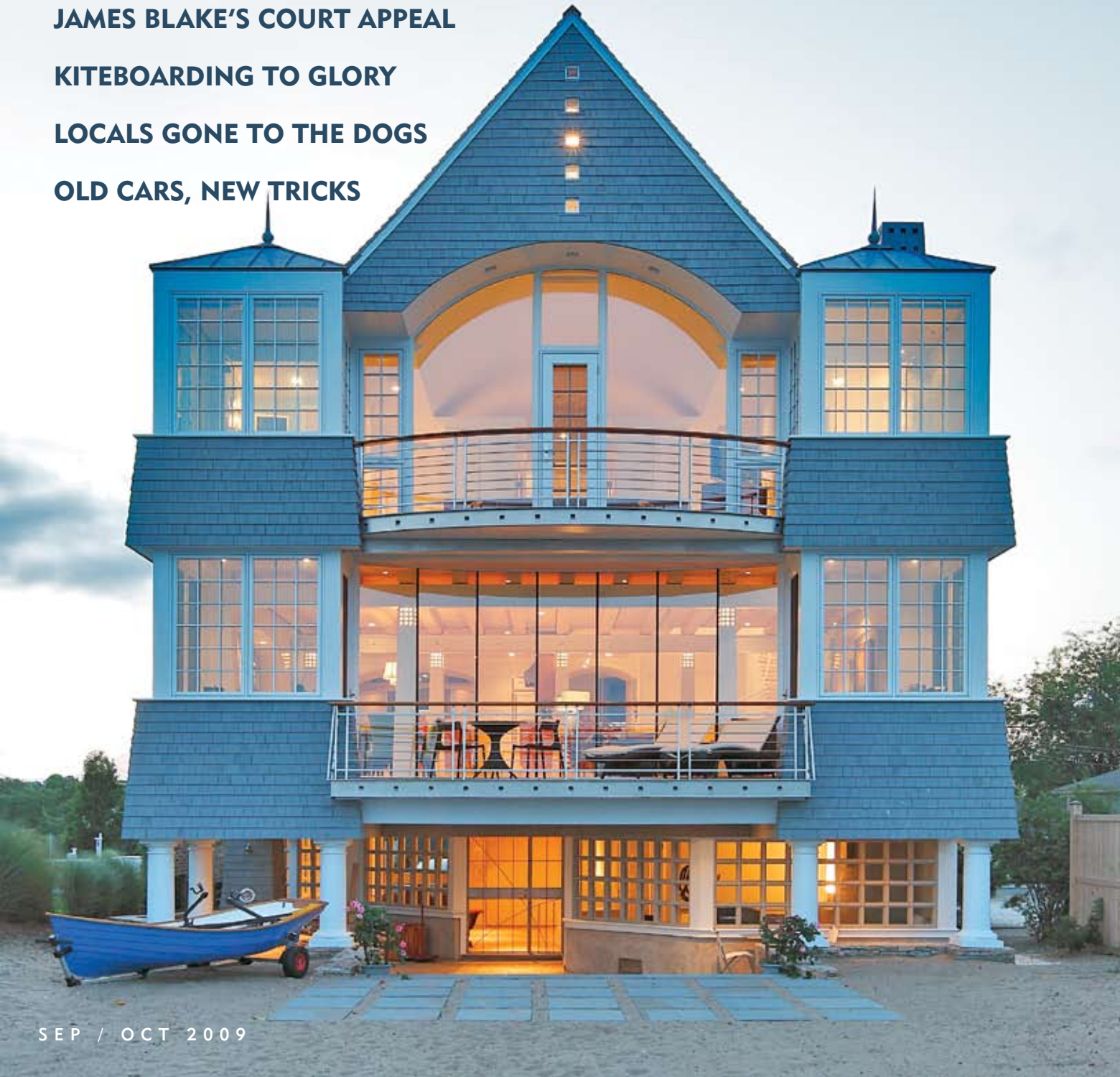

SEP / OCT 2009

defining garden spaces

SURVEYING YOUR YARD you realize your landscaping is looking a little sad. Don't despair. You can blend the utility of an outdoor space and the beauty of a landscaped yard with some proper planning.

Most spaces created by Jeff Kuffel, a landscape architect with Hoffman Landscapes, fall into one of two categories: areas designed for entertaining and areas designed to be sanctuaries. Spaces designated for entertaining tend to be closer to the house. Emphasizing the flow between indoors and out allows guests to easily transition outside after dinner. Meditative spaces, according to Kuffel, are better suited to areas of the yard that are more secluded.

Types of plants vary depending on the function of the area. A more wooded site would require shade-loving plants, a common feature of quiet, intimate gardens. A subdued, greener, softer palette often works better in these areas, flush with ferns and hostas and similar plants. Their perennial status means less work to replant each spring. Astibles or similar, more colorful perennials can be used to brighten up a shade garden. Closer to the house, bigger pops of color appear in sun-loving beds, pots, or planters. In any case, the best time to begin planning is the late fall or winter season. That's soon, so let's go. — *Sarah Chain*

News from....

Jeff Kuffel
Landscape Designer
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5 Low Cost Green Tips for an Eco-Friendly Yard

Becoming more eco-friendly is spreading rapidly across the country. However this consciousness is often considered too pricey. Here are five eco-savvy tips you can implement that are good for the planet and easy on your wallet.

Select Native Plants - Choose plants that are natural to this area for ecological reasons. They easily assimilate and require less care than imported varieties. Plus, native plants tend to be treated with fewer pesticides reducing the chemical impact on your property.

Use Organic Fertilizers - Today, organic fertilizers and non-toxic pest control options are readily available and affordable. These applications minimize chemicals in your yard and the resulting run-off water that drains into public water systems.

Compost Yard Waste - Turn leaves, plant trimmings and vegetable waste into a nutrient-rich compost that feeds your landscape. Buy a composter or create a pile in a hidden area of your property. Materials take about a year to break down, so next spring, everything will be ready for recycling.

Harvest Rain Water - Create a "rain garden" to capture stormwater runoff from your roof or other areas around your home such as driveways and walkways. Plant with suitable trees, shrubs & flowers allowing runoff water to soak into the ground and protect water quality.

Plant Trees and Shrubs - Trees and shrubs develop large root systems that minimize runoff and soil erosion. With less lawn area, you'll reduce energy expended on mowing while saving water.

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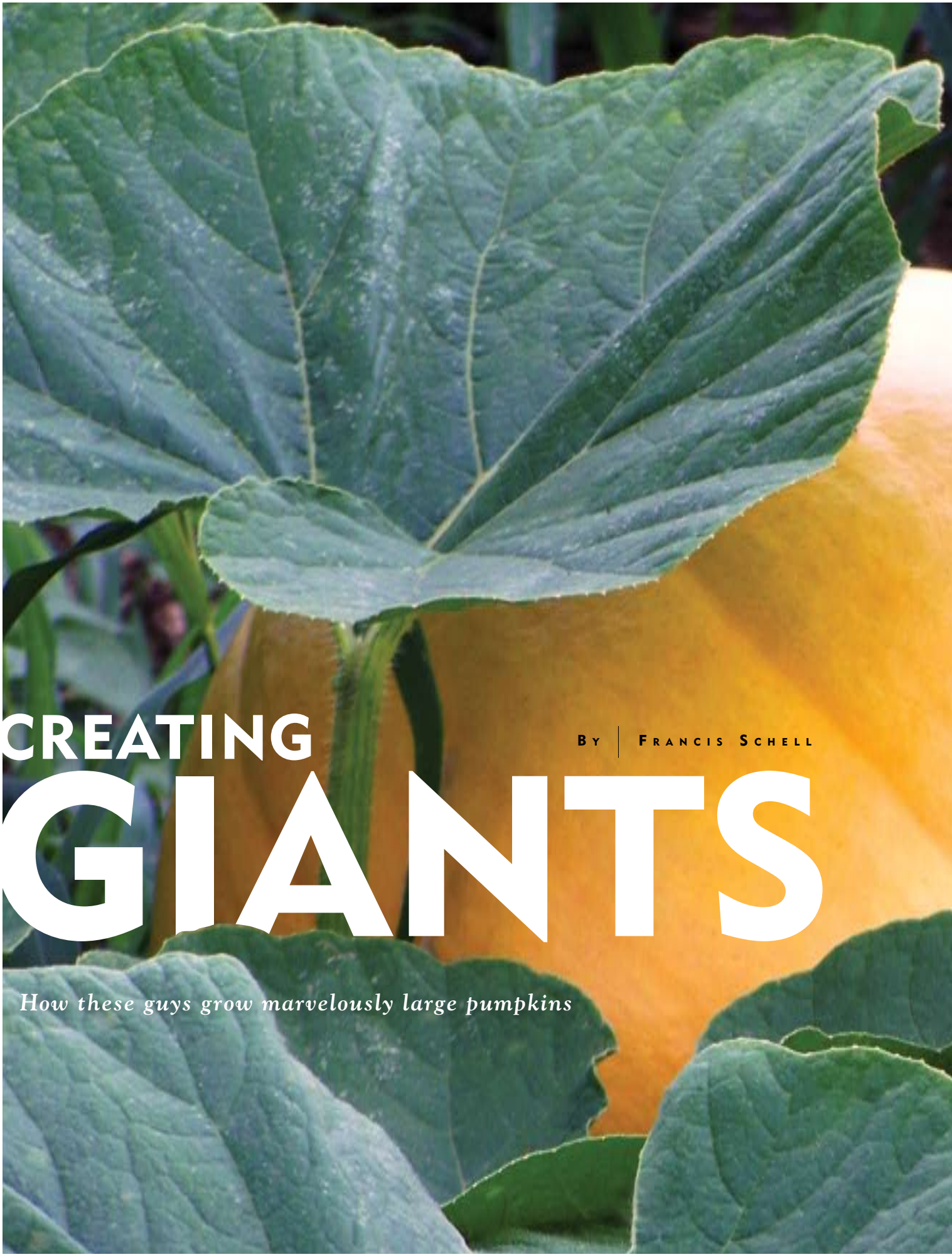

CREATING GIANTS

By | Francis Schell

How these guys grow marvelously large pumpkins

ADAM WHEELER'S LIFE has forever been entwined with plants. His grandparents on two sides gardened, as do his parents on rich Connecticut land in Morris. Growing up, after school he spent his time helping out in the large family vegetable garden and orchard. When he went off to college, he studied botany and horticulture. Today, at 29, he is a manager at Broken Arrow Nursery in Hamden, specializing in propagating unusual trees and shrubs. But mention the word pumpkin to Wheeler, and his eyes light up. He tells you about his consuming hobby, creating giants of the lowly gourd.

Forget the neighborhood Halloween pumpkin patch. These "fruits,"

as growers prefer to call them, are pumpkins on steroids, a special variety of *Cucurbita maxima* called 'Atlantic Giant' (AG), developed after 30 years of experimentation by Nova Scotia grower Howard Dill in 1979. Although farmers in America had always grown extra-large pumpkins for agricultural fairs, it was Dill's creation that made for maximum pumpkin weights going from 400 pounds to well over a thousand pounds today. Cultivating them grew from a backyard hobby to a worldwide competitive sport. The Great Pumpkin Commonwealth, an umbrella organization, keeps track of the close to 80 weigh-offs in this country, Canada, and overseas, organized by local clubs as distant as Alaska and South Africa. It tallies their records and anoints the world's champion. As of now, Rhode Island grower Joe Jutras holds the world record with his 1,689-pound pumpkin, picked in 2007. Wheeler belongs to the Connecticut Giant Squash and Pumpkin Growers Association, and he is raising his AGs to enter them at the association's fifth annual weigh-off on Penfield Beach in Fairfield on September 27.

Wheeler came by his infatuation with giant pumpkins while a graduate student in plant and soil science at the University of Vermont. He wrote a grant application for a pumpkin project and won it. At year's end he had raised a 659-pound pumpkin that was entered in the New England championship in 2002. It was displayed in the university library and it rode in the homecoming parade. When Wheeler moved back to Morris and bought a two-acre parcel of his parents' land, he cleared a 50-by-70-foot plot for growing giant pumpkins.

"Each pumpkin plant needs about 700 square feet to grow on," says Wheeler. "So space limits the number of fruits we can grow." He generally raises four, and the journey from sod to the judge's scale is an arduous one. It requires total commitment. His friend, champion-grower Joe Pukos, county surveyor in Leicester, New York, calls growing giant pumpkins "extreme gardening."

Every fall, and then again in spring, the soil needs to be heavily fertilized with

compost and organic nutrients, and then tested for pH or acidity level. (Seven is right for pumpkins.) In early May, seeds are chosen for sprouting in the greenhouse. Choosing ones to grow are akin to selecting bloodlines for thoroughbred race horses. In an effort to obtain the best strains, Wheeler, like all AG growers, participates in a countrywide exchange of seeds. For optimum weight, he wants a genetic line with thick fleshy walls and good water retention; the least ribbing is also paramount, to avoid premature splitting, one of the pitfalls of over-size fruit. This year Wheeler has placed his bets on proven-winner stock from colleagues in Ohio, in New Hampshire, and from Joe Pukos. "Joe sent me these seeds free before a champion 1,231-pounder was raised from the same lot," Wheeler says with a smile. "Today I would probably have to pay $400 to $600 at a club auction for each seed." All have identifying numbers that correspond to their origin.

He pots up eight seeds in the first week in May, and when the soil has warmed up a week or so later, plants out the five sturdiest sprouts, each with its pedigree label (number five would be kept on the sidelines in reserve). Now the arduous work begins. "Left alone, these seedlings would produce 300-pound fruit," says Wheeler. But the goal is to boost them to as much as five times that. So throughout the summer and early fall he spends up to 14 after-work hours a week tending his charges (despite occasional murmurs from his wife, Kristin). "The most important chores are watering and feeding," he says. At full growth the plants need 200 to 300 gallons of water a week, and need booster fertilizers—phosphate and nitrogen for roots and leaves, a high potassium diet for fruit growth, and calcium to thicken cell walls for extra weight. The fertilizers are sprayed on from a 50-gallon tank.

By early July vines have grown from each plant, showing flower buds along the long stems. Pumpkins carry separate male and female flowers, and in the normal course of engendering fruit, bees or other insects carry the pollen they gather randomly from male flowers to

the reproductive organ of the females. But Wheeler and other AG growers cannot risk such a free-love technique; they need to make sure that desirable genetic traits are transmitted. Wheeler chooses male flowers from other pumpkins, picks them off, and then painstakingly shakes their pollen into the open female blossoms that had been encased in paper bags, a sort of modern-day chastity belt to avoid accidents.

Nothing is left to chance. As the vines grow, Wheeler buries the side shoots to root and suck up extra nourishment. When the fruits form on the by-now 12-foot vine, they are vetted and only the ones that grow the fastest are retained. (Weight is calculated daily with the aid of a tape measure.) The pumpkins are shifted to be at right angle to the stem so they don't break off; sand or fabric is slipped under them to prevent rotting; at beach-ball size, they need protection from the sun so their skin doesn't harden and split; at the optimum growing time in August—a colossal 30 to 40 pounds a day!—fertilizing and water are boosted or withheld, to regulate the growth rate. Still, sometimes the pumpkins explode from the pressure of moisture inside. Pests are an ongoing threat—the dreaded squash vine borer or the cucumber beetle can destroy crops in a flash; fungus may cause the pumpkins to cawve in. (David Garrell, a doctor in Fairfield, lost a potential 1,019-pounder "personal best" to what began as a tiny fungus-caused lesion.) Hail storms are a major hazard. (Ray Leonzi of Trumbull went on a brief vacation one August and in his absence hail had turned his pumpkins to mush.) When cold nights are predicted, blankets are spread. Always the worst fear is that a pumpkin will split. Wheeler saw his 2008 potential winners succumb, when heavy rains after a long period of drought caused them to split from the stem into the cavity. Once the flesh is broken through, no matter how slightly, the pumpkin is disqualified, wiping out overnight months of intense hard work.

Yet, Wheeler is back again this year. Why? "It's pretty cool to see fruit grow at this rate," he says." Joe Pukos adds: "It's for the friendships you make with people of all walks of life with the same interest." Then he says jokingly: "And my wife always knows where I am: in the pumpkin patch." Wheelchair-bound Steve Jepson, of Stratford, president of the Connecticut club and a cub-scout leader who involves scouts in pumpkin-growing, says: "Every day

CHAMPION-GROWER JOE PUKOS CALLS GROWING GIANT PUMPKINS "EXTREME GARDENING"

you can get a kid to play in the dirt and not a computer game is a lucky day." Tom Privera, an information technology director in Poughkeepsie, New York, puts it succinctly: "Growing pumpkins is an obsession. It is part of who I am."

The morning of the weigh-off, four or five like-minded friends gather at Wheeler's patch. The largest pumpkins are severed from the plant at the last moment (they can lose a pound a day off the vine), carefully slid onto a wooden pallet, with a fork-lift placed on Adam's truck and ferried to the weigh-off location There they are lined up with the other 30-or-so entries (a few giant green squash join the pumpkins), as their owners and owners' families in pumpkin-colored T-shirts circle and gossip among them. The mood is joyous—and suspenseful, when each gourd is hoisted onto a scale and the judges announce the weight, then enter it on a board with the grower's name. Every grower hopes at least to best his past record. There is a weight-guessing contest, and prizes galore, funded by the club's seed auctions—for junior champion growers, for locally grown pumpkins, the Howard Dill award for the best-looking pumpkin, and the grand prize—$1,000 for the top weight. "The prize money in no way makes up for the expenses," says Wheeler, "but, wow, what a thrill to hear that winning weight." He has won at other weigh-offs, but the Connecticut one has eluded him. Who knows, he may become champion this year, and then national champion, even world champion! It's every grower's ambition.

Is there a life for giant pumpkins after the weigh-off? Some are carved into boats and "sailed" at Halloween on Tyler Lake in Goshen. Some are taken to visit schools—specifically, Kristin Wheeler's kindergarten class in Waterbury. Some are quickly broken up for their seeds. But perhaps their finest mission is to proclaim to the world: "Yes, Linus, you were right! The Giant Pumpkin does come!" ■