
PECONIC FORAGER

BY EVE KAPLAN-WALBRECHT

HAPPY HUNTER-GATHERER HALLOWEEN



AQUEBOGUE—My mom is a psychiatrist. She says that most of our behavior today comes from things we did that benefited us over the past several hundred thousand years of human evolution. In other words, although we think we're so modern, we're really just cavemen and cavewomen in disguise. Although I would never tell her to her face, I agree with her.

For example, let's look at the u-pick phenomenon. People get a real charge out of coming to the country to pick crops for themselves. It can be basically anything—berries, flowers, tomatoes. One farm even had a successful “U-Dig Potatoes” day. We've had families on our farm picking Swiss chard, celery, beans, beets, and kids always love the way carrots pop out of the ground. “I promise I'll eat these vegetables.” I heard one kid tell his mom. “I picked them myself!”

Why such satisfaction in the simple act of pulling a plant out of the dirt, or breaking a fruit off its stem? We're still hunter-gatherers at heart. In cities or suburbs we have few opportunities to indulge our primal urges. Women shop (gathering), and men hit and throw balls (training for the hunt), but nothing can compare with our need to collect our own food, at least once in a while.

Which brings us to the biggest u-pick season of all, Halloween. On our farm we offer pumpkin-picking on a small hill near the road, and I've spent plenty of time pumpkin-picker-watching. At the first sight of a field full of pumpkins, cars slam on their brakes and road traffic comes to a halt. After the car parks, its occupants spill out and are drawn directly to the nearest pumpkin as if by a gravitational force, and are blind to all surroundings including bathrooms, food, other people or animals, and large holes or stumps in the ground.

Once people get to the pumpkins, they carefully examine each one.

They pat them, poke them, roll them around, examine the front, the back, the sides, the bottom and top, pick them up, and shake them. Then the picker moves on to repeat this elaborate procedure on the next pumpkin, and the next, as far into the patch as they can get in search of the perfect pumpkin. Tall but not too tall, roundish, smooth and deep orange without scars or dimples, firm to the touch and prime jack-o'-lantern material. The pumpkin picker returns to the car carrying as many pumpkins as he or she can hold, and sometimes more. Last year the *New York Times* tried to inspire outrage in pumpkin pickers by running a front-page feature on “U-pick pumpkin” operations set up not in pumpkin fields, but on grassy lawns. People were being scammed, the *Times* seemed to say, by paying for pumpkins they thought they had “picked” themselves, even though the pumpkins clearly had already been picked by someone else!

But I think the article's author missed the point of u-pick entirely. “Pick” means to select, as well as to harvest. Whether they are picking pumpkins from the field or a lawn, people are coming a lot closer to filling their need to “gather” than they are by shopping at a mall store or a supermarket.

Standing out there in that pumpkin patch, now you know why you have 60 pounds of orange gourd in your arms. You're acting like any other primate, stocking your larder for the winter season. Harvesting the fruits of the land. Gathering nuts and berries to bring back to your 3,000-square-foot lair. That u-pick pumpkin makes you feel more human. □

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht farms with her husband, Chris, and two children at Garden of Eve organic farm in Aquebogue.