Pumpkin and its relatives, like watermelon, zucchini, squash and cucumber, are part of the cucurbits plant family, formally known as the Cucurbitaceae. Tropical and subtropical species of cucurbits are distinguished by tendril-bearing vines and characteristic fruits—actually a kind of berry called a “pepo”!

Urgent action to protect cucurbit biodiversity will ensure they will continue to feed us in the future. Cucurbits are threatened by Climate change, Declining interest in growing them, Loss of genetic diversity as farmers plant fewer varieties.

For more than 10,000 years, humans have bred and selected various cucurbits to be sweeter and larger, bitter or not, more brightly colored, and easier to farm, harvest and process. They’re an important source of carbohydrates, sugars, fiber, antioxidants, minerals, vitamins A and C, protein and oil. Seeds are a source of protein and oil.

Did you know? There’s a cucurbit species called loofah, which is used as a scrubbing sponge for cleaning.

The heaviest butternut squash in the world was grown in 2020 in Iowa, USA, and weighed 25.17 kg— that’s as much as six cats!

Cucurbits are part of the diet and livelihoods of millions of people.

Cucurbits are part of the culture and history of communities around the world. They’re an important source of carbohydrates, sugars, fiber, antioxidants, minerals, vitamins A and C, protein and oil. Seeds are a source of protein and oil.

Conserving cucurbits today, for tomorrow

A group of experts collects information on the main crops in the cucurbits family to learn their origins, where they’re most plentiful in the world, where their wild relatives are, how they’re used and how they are being bred.

They take a look at genebanks around the world to see which cucurbits are being safeguarded and which ones still need to be collected and conserved.

They come up with a plan of specific actions to guide future collecting and conservation.

Here’s how we’re making sure cucurbits will always be on the menu.

The recipe for a global crop conservation strategy:

The Crop Trust is facilitating the development of the strategies with its partners, like The World Vegetable Center, as well as teams of independent experts, to conserve all kinds of crops around the world. The effort is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) through the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE).

Learn more about the Crop Trust at croptrust.org.