Halloween enthusiasts need not take fright over the state of this year’s U.S. pumpkin crop. Supplies of the orange-yellow fruit are much more plentiful than last year, easing concerns of a possible shortage for carving jack-o’-lanterns and buying filling for pumpkin pies.

U.S. store supplies of canned pumpkin have almost overcome the effects of last year’s shortage, which was caused by damage to crops from heavy rains in parts of the Midwest.

“We’re rebuilding our inventory right now and as soon as we have enough pumpkin canned we’ll begin releasing the 2016 Libby’s pumpkin to our retail partners,” said Roz O’Hearn, spokeswoman for Libby’s, supplier of more than 80% of U.S. canned pumpkin. “So by end of the month, the 2015 shortage will be behind us.”

For Illinois farmer Mark
Berg, who grows roughly 120 acres of pumpkins for Libby’s, 2016 promises to be a pumpkin-palooza. Berg has just wrapped up his harvest ahead of schedule, averaging 30 tons of pumpkins per acre, well above his historical average of 25 tons and worth about $500 per acre.

Last year’s U.S. pumpkin harvest totaled 754 million pounds valued at $90 million, the smallest crop since the U.S. Department of Agriculture began tracking the sector in 2000.

Illinois, which typically produces about 90% of the United States’ canned or processed pumpkins, last year harvested only 318 million pounds of pumpkin worth $12 million, according to USDA.

University of Illinois plant pathologist Mohammad Babadoost said this year, Illinois’ average pumpkin yields could be above 22 tons per acre.

Nonetheless, with the harvest possibly stretching into November and vulnerable to weather, Babadoost remains cautious after heavy rains in 2015 spawned various diseases that robbed Illinois producers of nearly half their expected yield.

Added Libby’s spokeswoman O’Hearn, “So far, we appear to be in much better shape than we were in 2015.” Harvesting for Libby’s, a unit of Swiss-based Nestle SA, started last month.

Story by Theopolis Walters
Photo by Mary Ann Lauters