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Gourds have been cultivated for thousands of years and were used as utensils, storage containers and instruments. While once a utilitarian item, they are now showing up in painted crafts, birdhouses, or scattered around with pumpkins and mums for fall décor. While it is too late to grow them this year, plan ahead for next season.

Gourd is the common name applied to a group of plants in the cucurbit family. They are closely related to squash and pumpkins. These warm-season vining plants, produce hard-shelled fruits. There are three main classes of gourds that are commonly grown. Cucurbitas are the ornamental gourds which include a variety of shapes with bright colored mature fruits. The Lagenaria gourds are those that encompass the large utilitarian gourds such as birdhouse, dippers and bottle gourds. And lastly the luffa's, or the sponge gourd.

The Cucurbita gourds produce large yellow or orange flowers that bloom during the day. The Lagenaria group produces large white blossoms that bloom at night. The resulting fruit is a light green which turns to brown or tan as they dry. The luffas bloom during the day with yellow flowers. They typically are brown at maturity. The outer shell is removed to expose a tough, fibrous interior that is used as a sponge. If harvested when quite small, it is also called vining or Chinese okra, and is edible.

All gourds like warm soil, full sun and a relatively long growing period. Wait for all chances of frost to pass before you plant gourds and allow the soil temperature to warm up. Usually late April to early May is the soonest you should plant, with subsequent plantings up through June or early July.

Gourd vines, like many members of the cucurbit family, are prolific growers. Give them room to grow and spread, or give them a fence or trellis to grow on. For the long club, dipper, and bottle gourds, trellising them will provide straight fruits.

Prepare the soil by adding organic matter prior to planting. Try to have the area as weed free as possible and mulch to prevent grass and weeds or you will have a mess of vines with weeds in them. Mulching is highly encouraged for weed control, but it also helps conserve moisture, and keeps the fruits cleaner.

Fertilize with a complete fertilizer at planting and side dress when the vines begin to run. Too much fertilizer will give you more vines and less flowers and fruit. If you plant your gourds like pumpkins and watermelons in hills, with several seeds per hill, you will need to thin them back to two or three plants per hill after germination. Water is essential to good production, especially when it gets hot and dry.

Gourds, like all other members of the cucurbit family, produce separate male and female blossoms, which must be pollinated by insects. They also suffer from the same pest problems as squash and cucumbers—the squash vine borer, squash bugs, cucumber beetles and powdery mildew. Monitor for these pest problems, to control them early.

Most gourds require a long growing period. Usually a minimum of 90 days up to 180 days is required from seed to harvest. At maturity, the fruits will develop hard, glossy, shells. Know what is expected for the varieties you are growing. They can be smooth or warty, will brightly colored, or white, tan or light green. They are ready to be harvested

when the stems dry and turn brown. The stems are usually quite tough, so harvest with pruning shears, knife or scissor to cut them off the stem. Be sure to leave an inch or two of stem attached, to help them last longer.

Handle the gourds with care. Avoid bruising, scratching or puncturing the fruits. If there are any soft spots or blemishes, discard these gourds, or dry them separately. It is best to harvest most of your gourds prior to a frost. While mature fruits can handle a light frost, colors may be slightly affected, and less developed fruit will be damaged.

Gourds benefit from being cured after they have been picked. To cure gourds, first start with clean gourds. Wash off the soil, and then wipe the fruits with a cloth dipped in rubbing alcohol, or dip the gourds into a bath of one part Clorox to nine parts of water. Don't soak them, just a quick dip. Then lay them out so that they aren't touching each other. Those gourds that you want to use for birdhouses, dippers or as painted crafts, should cure even longer, up to three or four weeks depending on the type and size of the gourd. Periodically turn the fruit to discourage shriveling and promote even curing. If you can provide warmth during this time period, it will speed up the drying and discourage decay. Once they are completely dry, the gourd becomes very light-weight and you can hear the seeds rattling around inside.

Luffa or sponge gourds should be harvested when the outer shell is dry. When you can hear the seeds begin to rattle around inside, remove the stem end and shake out the seeds from the center cavity. Then you can begin to remove the outer rind. You can peel the skin, or soak the gourds in warm water until the outer skin softens to the point where it can be easily removed, or use running water to help soften the outer skin. Once the sponge is removed, soak it in one part bleach to nine parts water to obtain the creamy white appearance. Rinse it in clear water and dry before using.

