

Gourds

Dippers, birdhouse, luffa, calabash, cucuzzi, bottle, Turk's turban—all of these have one thing in common, they are gourds. Gourds have grown in popularity over the years, and are now found everywhere from farmers markets, grocery stores, u-pick farms to craft boutiques and fairs nationwide. While once a utilitarian item, they are now showing up in painted crafts, birdhouses, and the like. As their popularity grows, more and more people are becoming "gourdheads" -- the self-proclaimed gourd enthusiast.

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, which are commonly used as decorations. Some varieties of gourds can be eaten when immature -- before they form their tough outer rind. Still others are used more for their fibrous interior as in the case of the sponge or luffa gourd.

Gourds have been cultivated for thousands of years by many cultures worldwide. Native Americans used them as utensils, storage containers and other useful purposes. Today, their popularity is growing. There is a very active American Gourd Society, with active chapters in many states. Regional and national meetings are held for "gourdheads" to get together and share their experiences and knowledge.

Classes of Gourds

There are three main classes of gourds which are commonly grown. First there is the cucurbitas, or the ornamental gourds which include the variously shaped bright colored gourds often used in arrangements. The Lagenaria gourds are those that encompass the large utilitarian gourds such as birdhouse, dippers and bottle gourds. The third group is 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 okra, and is also edible.

Growing

All gourds like a 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. If you plant in cold soil, the seeds may rot instead of germinating.

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 up. For the long club, dipper and bottle gourds, if you want straight fruits, it is best to grow them on a trellis or fence to allow the fruit to grow long and straight. Otherwise they may curl -- which can also be nice, depending on what you plan to use them for.

Prepare the soil by adding organic matter prior to planting. Compost works very well. Try to have the area as weed free as possible, since it is hard to deal with weeds amongst the prolific vines. A general fertilizer recommendation is to apply two to three pounds of 5-10-10 per 100 square feet at planting. Many people prefer to plant gourds like pumpkins and watermelons, in hills, with several seeds per hill. You would need to thin them back to two or three plants per hill after germination. Side dress with fertilizer when the vines begin to "run". Water is essential to good production, especially when it gets so hot and dry. Mulching is highly encouraged for several reasons. It helps to conserve moisture, plus it will help to keep weeds out and the fruits cleaner.

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. Some will be smooth, others warty. Some will be brightly colored, others white, tan or light green. They are ready to be harvested when the stems dry and turn brown. The stems should be quite tough. When harvesting use a 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.

Handling

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.

Drying

Those that you plan to use as is, for decorations, should be ready in three or four days. Those gourds that you want to use for birdhouses, dippers or as painted crafts, should cure even longer, up to three or four weeks, or longer, depending on the type and size of the gourd. Discard any that show signs of spoiling. 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. You will know they are completely dry, when the gourd becomes very light-weight and you can hear the seeds rattling around inside.

Once completely dry, either paint them, cut them, or apply several coats of clear shellac to enhance their beauty and help to preserve them. The large Lagenaria gourds can take longer for the internal drying to completely take place. After curing, the surface can be smoothed and polished with very fine steel wool or sandpaper.

Luffa gourds have specific harvesting and processing techniques to produce high quality sponges. Harvest 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. Some people prefer to soak the gourds in warm water until the outer skin softens to the point where it can be easily removed. Others use running water to help soften the outer skin, still others peel theirs. Once the rind is removed, soak it in one part of bleach to nine parts of water to obtain the creamy white appearance. Rinse it in clear water, and dry before using.

The popularity of gourds may come as no surprise, since there are so many uses for them. Gourd seeds are available from most seed companies and local nurseries, but late spring is the time for planting. If you want to get more involved in the culture, care or crafting of gourds, consider joining the American Gourd Society, P.O. Box 274, Mt. Gilead, OH 43338-0274. And if you haven't grown any for this year, there are lots to buy, and you can plan ahead for next year.