

## Tips on Growing Hardshell Gourds

Growing gourds is very like growing squash--with some important differences. The biggest difference is that with squash and pumpkins, you harvest at a much earlier stage. Most gardeners have had the experience of finding a giant zucchini that had hidden itself away until it was a giant--tough, stringy and not very good to eat. But with gourds, tough is good. Soil preparation-- Like squash, gourds like light, well-drained soil, but will settle for less. In Carolina red clay, a raised bed can help, because the soil warms sooner in the spring. A soil test will show whether you need to lime or make nutritional additions. Gourds like a pH range of 5.8-6.2. Be sure to pick your gourd garden site where you get at least 6-8 hours of sun. These are vegetables and won't grow well at all in the shade! Hardshells mature in 110-130 days, so plant as soon as the soil warms in the spring. In the North Carolina Piedmont, late April through early-June is good. Follow recommendations for planting winter squash. Too early, and your seed can rot. Too late, and the gourd will not be mature at frost and will only rot instead of drying out hard.

Pollination--Each gourd vine bears male and female flowers. The male flowers appear first. You can tell the difference because female flowers have a small gourd shape beneath petals. The first vine that grows will have more male flowers than female. Cut the vine at about 10 feet long to get more female flowers--and more gourds. Insects (and industrious gourd gardeners) carry pollen from male to female flowers. Bees have been the most frequent pollinators, but bee mites have cut local populations. Don't kill any more by using the insecticide, Sevin, on blossoms, because it is hardest on bees. Other insects, even enemies like cucumber beetles and squash bugs, are frequent pollinators as well. The more pollinations, the more fruit and the more seed. Pollen can be gently transferred with an artists' paintbrush or a cotton swab or by picking the male flower and carrying pollen to the female. Generally, the larger the gourd, the fewer you'll get per vine: one bushel gourd and 100 banana gourds, for example.

Soaking overnight can speed germination. Starting seed indoors in peat pots can also lengthen the growing season, but gourd roots are deep and wide, so give the seedlings room. BE WARNED: All gourds sprawl. A hardshell can grow a 100-foot-long vine in a single season. Most growers recommend spacing in hills 6 feet apart in rows at least 4 feet apart. One Guinness Book of Records gardener plants a single dipper in a 10'x10'square. Plant 4-6 seeds about twice the length of the seed. Keep moist. Seed typically germinate in 8-10 days, but can sprout as long as six weeks after planting. Most early growth is underground, so don't despair if you don't see much happening the first month or so. Black fabric mulch keeps weeds down in the expanses between the hills and raises soil temperature.

To trellis, or not to trellis is the question in the gourd patch. Trellised gourds are cleaner and easier to protect from insects. Two sturdy posts, an upper and lower wire and garden twine woven between will support heavy gourds, like birdhouses. An oversized wire cage, like a tomato cage but larger, works for smaller gourds, like bananas. The key is how heavy the gourds are. Several dozen 10-pound bottles gets to be a strain. Your trellis can crash. Grown on the ground, the increasing weight of the gourd causes the shape to settle so the gourd has a flat side to sit on. A trellis-grown gourd will roll around on a round bottom. On the ground, gourd vines root at the joints, providing extra nutrition and insurance against vine borers. Slip a shingle, brick or bit newspaper underneath and dust every few days with Sevin. Even wrapping tin foil an inch into the soil around the roots up to an inch or two above the soil can help deter vine borers.

Growers have widely different ideas about fertilizing gourds. Some think none is best, other fertilize daily with manure tea. I sprinkle a handful of 10-10-10 in a circle around the hill when planting, so the roots will reach it when growth is well established. Everybody agrees that fertilizing after August encourages leaf growth when the gourd should be hardening.

Gourd enemies-- Gourds don't like weeds or drought. Diseases like bacterial wilt, anthracnose and mildew strike gourds. You can control by cleanliness and eliminating disease carriers--like cucumber beetles or shield beetles which are carriers of bacterial wilt. Few pests bother hardshells. Snails and cucumber beetle larvae can kill seedlings. Adult cucumber beetles chew holes in leaves, but more important, carry bacterial wilt. Squash bugs are often abundant. Vine borers don't seem to bother hardshells.

## Tips on Growing Luffas

Luffa, the sponge gourd, benefits greatly from trellising. Grown on the ground the sponge inside is often discolored and weakened. The trellis must be sturdy to support the heavy gourds. On trellises, space luffa 2'-4' apart. Luffas need at least 110 days to mature, so plant as soon as the soil warms up, late April in North Carolina. Pay particular attention to controlling insects when the little luffas first start growing. Healthy, mature leaves have a metallic bluish tint to them. If the leaves lose this tint, they need to be fertilized. An application eight weeks after planting prevents loss of color. When the skin turns brown or yellow, pick them. You can easily peel at this stage, although many growers wait until the luffa is totally dry and brown. Shake out the seeds, and bleach the interior with chlorine bleach if you like. Be sure to rinse!

## Tips on Growing Ornamental Gourds

Ornamentals are just as easy to grow as zucchinis. Ornamental seed look like summer squash seed although different kinds can have different size seeds. They germinate well without soaking. Ornamentals mature in about 90 days from planting, so count backwards from when you want them to choose a planting time. In the Carolina Piedmont, a late April to early May planting will produce a crop by Independence Day, and you can celebrate by planting more for fall harvest. Plant hills about 4 feet apart in rows four feet apart. Plant three seeds to the hill, about half an inch deep. Thin to two. If you are planting from a pack marked "mixed," leave seedlings of various sizes. Different sizes often show different kinds. Growers rarely trellis ornamentals. Because they are small and light, there is no need to keep them from settling into the soil. They can make attractive vines over patio trellises if you want them as colorful decorations.

Harvesting at the right time is the first key to curing ornamentals. Pick too soon and the gourds rot. Pick too late and sunshine fades the bright colors. Now comes the secret: Test for maturity by gently squeezing the gourd. Start at the end of the vine where the baby gourds are, and work your way back to the hill where the most mature are and cut those for decorative use. If you want to save ornaments, let the vine completely mature and die and then dry out they mature gourds. They will lose all of their color, but can then be used for crafts of all kinds. Curing is the gradual movement of water from inside to outside. Don't seal ornamentals. Varnishing or shellacking seals in water and dooms the gourd to rot. Polish only with liquid floor wax if desired.

## Tips on Drying and Cleaning Gourds

"My gourds rotted" is a common complaint from new growers. The remedy is starting your seeds early enough and harvesting when the gourd is mature instead of picking them before the vines die naturally. When the vine begins to turn brown where it meets the gourd, cut the vine two or three inches from the gourd. Stack them to dry off the ground in an airy place—not inside your house. **Remember.** Not all gourds you harvest will be mature enough to dry out and these will indeed rot! Freezing won't hurt a mature gourd so set them on a pallet, in a storage shed or barn or under the carport, and you might as well get rid of the soft, immature gourds sooner rather than later. They will be soft and slimy as they rot.

As your mature gourds dry, they will mold. The mold you see on the skin is the natural process of the water wicking out of the gourd for it to dry. When the seeds rattle, the gourd is ready to use. Once you do have gourds that have dried, soak them for a few minutes in warm water and scrub with a metal pot scrubber. That mold comes right off with little effort this way. You can put bleach in the water if you would like, but wear gloves and rinse the gourd thoroughly. There will be a lovely pattern on the surface of the gourd from the mold. If you want them pristine, you will have to "green clean" them using a very dull butter knife and peel the extremely thin layer of skin off very carefully. This takes a light hand and much practice, so don't be disappointed if your green cleaned gourds rot until you get the hang of it.

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Yearly Membership: \$12.00 which includes four quarterly issues of *The Gourd News*.

North Carolina Gourd Society  
2713 Peachtree Street  
Raleigh, NC 27608  
919-696-0744  
paul.a.buescher@gmail.com  
<http://www.ncgourdsociety.org/>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Be sure to email or call the NC Gourd Society if you have any gourd questions! The Chapter meets quarterly in the Triangle area. There are several gourd "Patches" around the state that meet each month to work on various gourd craft projects for a small supply fee. All meetings are open to the public and free to attend and just watch.

## **76th Annual North Carolina Gourd Arts & Crafts Festival**

**November 4-5, 2017 in the Holshouser Building on the NC State Fair Grounds, Raleigh, N.C.  
Open Saturday 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. and Sunday 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.**

**Over 70 competitive categories try for the ribbons and prizes. You'll see "gourdication" stations and collectors pieces to inspire you. There are also special gourd workshops, gourd growers, crafters, artists and suppliers. Free kid's crafting table. The public is most welcome to attend. Bring your camera and a friend. You won't believe the amazing things you will see!**

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