

GOURDS

by Jim Gormely

It has been said that pumpkins are to carve, squash is to eat and gourds are to look at. It can be very rewarding to plant gourds and watch them grow. Harvesting these colorful plants is a joy as they add color to fall decorations.

Gourds, pumpkins and squash are all in the same Cucurbitaceous family and have similar cultural requirements. Growing gourds is a great way to get children involved in nature and off of their electronic devices. Planting and caring for a garden teaches children and adults alike how our produce grows and is harvested.

START GOURDS INDOORS

Gourd seeds have an extremely hard protective coating, so many gardeners find that soaking the seeds for 24 hours before planting encourages germination. A lengthier soaking may cause rot.

Start seeds in small peat or other pots in commercial seed mix or native soil with compost. Keep warm and moist. Give young seedlings bright light. Check daily.

MOVE PLANTS OUTDOORS

Transplant the seedlings from containers to the garden once the plants reach about four inches and have two sets of true leaves (about 4 -6 weeks), and the outdoor temperature stays above 55 degrees. "Harden off" the plants prior to planting outside by gradually moving the pots outdoors until they can remain outside for 24 hours.

Keep the soil moist, tapering to moderate watering as the plant matures.

These plants are monoecious, having both male and female flowers on the same plant. Only female flowers bear fruit.

To insure fertilization, insects, usually bees, must carry the pollen from the male flower to the stigma of the female flower. The bee population is declining, possibly due to pesticide usage in our gardens and orchards. For help with alternate methods of pest control, consult <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/index.html>

Plants can be trained on an arbor or fence. Hanging gourds may produce as many as twenty-five to thirty gourds on one plant, all with different shapes.

HARVESTING AND CURING

Gourds need 110 -120 days to reach maturity; larger gourds need 175 days. Harvest when the vines become dry and before the first hard frost. Gardeners usually cut the gourds from the vine leaving a three-inch long stem.

Now the gourd needs curing. Start by cleaning the surface with soapy water, then allow them to air dry. You can wipe them with rubbing alcohol to further ensure the surface is clean and completely dry. Store in a dark, dry shed or garage. Sometimes mold may grow over the gourds' exterior, which when cleaned off will leave an unusual and beautiful mottled design on the surface. The gourd is cured when the seeds rattle around inside.

SAVE THE SEEDS

Cut the bottom off the dry gourd and shake the seeds out; rinse if needed. Put them in an open container or paper bag to dry completely without becoming moldy. Later you can store them in a plastic, lidded container. Label and date.

The difference between pumpkins, gourds and squash can be confusing. There are many types of each that come in a variety of shapes and colors. By examining the stems, you can tell the difference. Pumpkin stems are woody and the skin is hard. Squash such as Banana, Hubbard, Turban and Butternut have a somewhat spongy stem. Gourds have a sturdy stem that is enlarged near the fruit.

Gourds are mostly grown, not for their nutritive value, but for their ornamental, showy shapes and colors. They are wonderful in autumnal displays, even more enjoyable when you grow them yourself.

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