

NEWS RELEASE

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Gourds were important in early human history as drinking vessels, rattles, drums, ladles and masks to name a few uses. They remain a curiosity and are frequently grown in both home and school gardens. In fall, gourds are used as decorations for both Halloween and Thanksgiving.

A gourd is ready for harvest when the plant begins to die and the small, brown tendril attached to the stem dries. When harvesting, leave a 2-3 inch stem and take care not to bruise the gourd during handling. After harvest, remove garden soil from the surface of gourds and wash with a 10% chlorine bleach solution.

There are three main gourd types: ornamentals (softshell), luffa and hardshell. Softshell normally do not keep well, but have many ornamental uses. Luffas can be dried and used as a type of sponge. Hardshells can be dried and kept for many years.

Ornamental or softshell gourds are used in fall decorations and need not be cured. They come in mixed shades of orange, yellow, green and cream. Some softshells can be dried and used as hardshells; I have had good luck with the 'egg' shaped type. However, most ornamental gourds will shrivel and can be composted.

Luffa gourds can be a fun as well as useful project. Cure for 3-4 weeks at 70-85 degrees, and then soak in water for several days until the shell falls off. Dry the gourds well and use them like a sponge for body, dishes or even car washing.

Hardshell gourds must be stored in a warm, dry, well-ventilated place for at least 3-4 weeks at 70-85 degrees. When harvested, hardshells are an attractive light green shade. Since most home temperatures at this time of year are in the ideal curing range, hardshell gourds can be cured and enjoyed at the same time. While curing, gourds may grow a little bit of mold, so keep a chlorine solution on hand and wipe the surface of the gourd whenever this happens.

Gourds of the hardshell type are numerous. The classic birdhouse gourd can be used to create a lovely home for local birds. The size of the hole drilled depends on the type of bird you wish to attract. Apple gourds can be used to impress your favorite teacher. Penguin gourds can be made into interesting bird figures. Canteen gourds can be cleaned out and used as drinking vessels. Just about any gourd shape can be imagined into an interesting craft possibility.

Cleaning a hardshell gourd does take some work, however, and several books have detailed information on how to do this. The Stanislaus County library has over 10 publications about gourd craft.

For those who didn't plant gourds this year, plan on planting during May or June of 2008. If you wish to decorate your own gourd now, cleaned ones are available for sale on the internet or try through nearby gourd farms. The last weekend in September, Zittel Farms of Folsom will be having their annual Gourd and Arts Festival. For more information go to <http://www.zittelgourds.com/>