

Growing Guide: Gourds

Closely related to pumpkins, squash, and cucumbers, gourds are in the Cucurbitaceae family and produce hard-shelled fruits in a variety of shapes and sizes. Today they're most often used as a seasonal display in autumn, such as in centerpieces and entryway decorations, as well as to make crafts, including ornaments and birdhouses.



However, in early civilizations gourds served important roles in daily life. They were used as vessels for water and food storage; they were also made into utensils such as ladles, as well as tools and musical instruments.

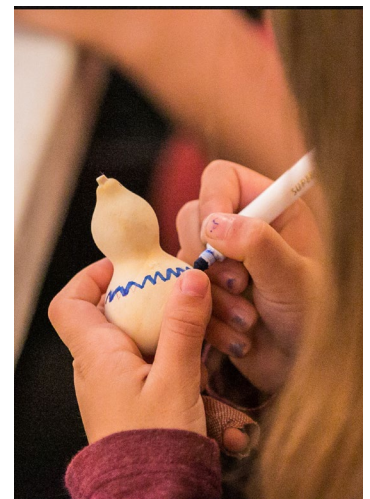
Fun Facts about Gourds

- Gourds are thought to be one of the first plants cultivated ancient peoples; evidence exists that they were grown 8000 to 10,000 years ago in the region that is now part of Mexico.
- Gourd plants produce their pistils and stamens on separate flowers. They require a pollinator to transfer the pollen from the pistil of one flower to the stamen of another.
- Gourds are, botanically speaking, a fruit. There are hundreds of species of gourds, with fruits ranging in size from that of a marble to 7' long.
- The hardened, cured surface of gourds can be painted, carved, etched, and burned. Elaborately decorated gourds that have been made into pieces of fine art can fetch \$1000 or more.
- Under ideal conditions (warm, sunny weather and a long growing season) the vines of some types of gourd plants can grow 40' long!

Types and Gourds and Their Uses

The most common species of gourds fall into one of three genera (plural of genus): *Cucurbita*, *Lagenaria*, and *Luffa*.

Cucurbita gourds are believed to be native to the Americas. These ornamental gourds come in many bright colors and varying shapes and sizes, and are commonly used for tabletop decorations. In the past, some non-bitter varieties were harvested while young and eaten. Many of these gourds contain chemicals capable of producing soapy lathers thus were used to make early soap, shampoo, and detergent. Another early use was as an aid for darning socks. When dried the brittle shells can crack easily so these varieties were not relied on as containers. The plants produce yellow flowers that open during the day.



Decorating gourds is a fun activity that connects kids to the long tradition of gourd art.

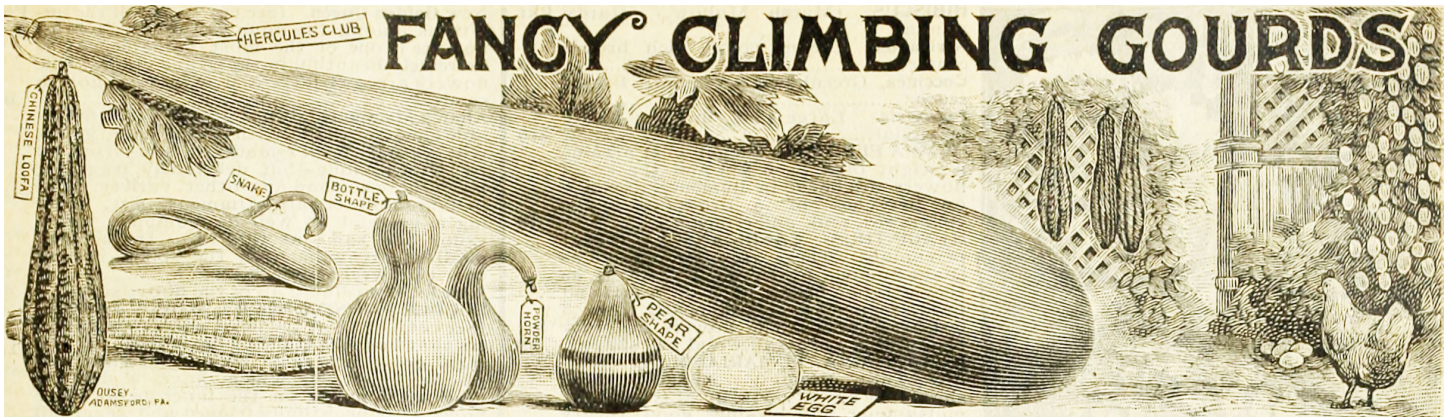
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Lagenaria gourds, which include bottle gourds, are the toughest and most versatile of the group. Archaeologists believe that *Lagenaria* originated in tropical areas of Africa. Some species grow quite large and when dried their hard shells are as tough as wood. They are sturdy enough to serve as food vessels, utensils, storage containers, musical instruments, even buoys for fishing nets — and people have used them in all these different ways for millennia! Here in the North America they are the favorite gourd of crafters and artists. They produce white flowers that bloom at night.



This watertight jug is made from a gourd and coconut fiber rope.

Luffa gourds are also known as the vegetable sponge. Luffas are native to India, where people eat the unripe fruits like cucumbers. Once luffas mature, their outer shell hardens, the inside dries out, and the fibrous interior can be used as a sponge or scrubber for cleaning everything from dishes to bodies. If the luffa dries between uses, it never sours — a problem with other types of sponges. They have also been used as potholders, doormats, shoe insoles, and insulators. Luffas produce yellow flowers and need the longest growing season of all the gourds.



This illustration of gourd varieties, showing the diversity of shapes and sizes, is from the 1902 May's Seed Catalog.

How to Grow Gourds

Most gourds are warm-season annuals that require a long growing season of 100 to 180 days (depending on the species). If you wish to sow seeds directly in the garden, wait until soil temperatures reach 70° F. In cool climates with short growing seasons, start seeds in peat pots indoors and transplant them to the garden once the soil has warmed. To hasten maturity, build a growing tent for your gourds.

Gourds need full sun and soil that drains well to produce a good crop. They also need plenty of room to spread out as they grow. Arrange plants in hills or rows. To save space and prevent fruit scarring, train vines to grow up a trellis or fence.

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Plants in the Curcubitaceae family usually bear their pistils and stamens on separate flowers. (These are called "incomplete flowers.") Many new gardeners are discouraged when the first blossoms of the season drop without producing fruits. This is because the stamen-bearing flowers often appear first. Eventually the pistil-bearing flowers emerge, insects transfer the pollen from the stamens to the pistils, and fruit will set.

Gourds are not tolerant of cold weather, so harvest them before the first frost. They are ready to harvest when stems dry and turn brown. Use a knife or pruners to cut them from the vine.

After harvest, wash the gourds and then place them in a dark, dry, well-ventilated area. You can wipe them off weekly and rotate to facilitate drying and decrease mold growth. Although a thin layer of mold may still develop during drying, as long as the shell is firm to the touch, then the fruit is drying properly.

It can take anywhere from one to six months for gourds to dry fully. Once dry, the gourd will be light weight, sound hollow when tapped and the seeds will rattle if shaken (although it is possible for seeds to become stuck to the side of the gourd).

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[Lesson Plan: Imperfect Flowers: A Design for Genetic Diversity](#)

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These gourds are in different stages of drying.

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