

ORNAMENTAL GOURDS



Although Yuma is not known as a large gourd area with total acreage in the county totally less than 10 acres. Those that grow gourds, produce them for regional specialty markets.

Gourds are grown as garden novelties for their strange and wonderful shapes and as craft material. The smallest can be the size of a marble and the largest a 200-pound armful. Household necessities since prehistory, gourds still are used today. Many growers raise birdhouse gourds as homes for purple martins, colorful ornamentals decorate our Thanksgiving tables, and luffa sponges are popular bath time bud-

dies.

A gourd is a hollow, dried shell of a fruit in the Cucurbitaceae family of plants of the genus *Lagenaria*. Gourds can be used as a number of things, including bowls or bottles. Gourds are used by people throughout the world for musical instruments, including shakers, maracas, drums, horns, marimbas and various string gourds resembling a banjo. Other uses include pipes, masks, canteens, water jugs, dippers, birdhouses, bath sponges and decorative gourds with intricate etched designs. So important were gourds to Haitian people in the early 1800s that gourds were made the national currency.

Gourds have been cultivated for thousands of years by many cultures worldwide, including Native Americans, for their usefulness as utensils, storage containers, and as ornaments. Gourds are related to melons, squash, pumpkins, and cucumbers, all members of the Cucurbitaceae or Cucumber family.

There are typically three types of gourds grown in the United States: the cucurbita, or ornamental gourds; the lagenaria, which encompass the large, utilitarian gourds; and the luffa, or vegetable sponge.

The cucurbita include the colorful, variously-shaped ornamental gourds often used in fall arrangements. Plants of this group produce large orange or yellow blossoms that bloom in the daytime. The lagenaria group includes the Martin or Birdhouse, Bottle and Dipper gourds. These plants produce white blossoms that bloom at night. Lagenaria gourds are green on the vine, turning brown or tan, with thick, hard shells when dry. Luffas have an outer shell that is easily removed to expose a tough, fibrous interior that can be used as a sponge. Luffas produce prolific vines with yellow blossoms and require the longest growing season of all the gourds. Birdhouse gourds, (*Lagenaria siceraria*), are commonly used in southern USA for group housing for purple martins, which reputedly help control mosquitoes.

Gardeners become concerned when gourd plants blossom, but do not set fruit. Gourds produce separate male and female flowers. Male flowers serve as the pollinator and female flowers bear fruit. The female flower can be distinguished by the presence of the immature fruit at its base. Several male flowers are produced before any female flowers, and it is these male flowers that drop without setting fruit. In time, both male and female flowers are produced and the first fruit is set.

Day-blooming gourds are pollinated the same as Cucurbits like squash and cantaloupes, and commercial plantings typically have bee hives supplied. There are night blooming gourds that are pollinated by moths, which are normally present in adequate supply unless they are drawn off by night lights in the area.

Gourds were the earliest plant species domesticated by humans and were originally used by man as containers or vessels before clay or stone pottery, and is sometimes referred to as "nature's pottery". The original and evolutionary shape of clay pottery is thought to have been modeled

on the shape of certain gourd varieties.

In addition to utilitarian uses, gourds have been assigned various other functions throughout history in various cultures. Very early specimens of gourd shells discovered (for example, in Peru) indicate the use of gourds as means of recording events of the time. In North America, the carving of pumpkins and some other gourds into Jack-o-Lanterns is a popular cultural activity during Halloween.

Generally, gourds are used more for utilitarian uses than for food. Only a few varieties are actually harvested for consumption, mostly in Asia. The shell of the gourd, when dried, has a wooden appearance. Gourd "wood" is essentially cellulose that has no grain, varying in thickness from paper-thin to well over an inch. Drying gourds, which takes months in some cases, causes the internal contents (seeds and fruit matter) to dry out completely, although seeds are often still capable of germination. A bitter taste or smell is typically evident when opening a gourd that has not completely dried out inside.

It has also been found that gourd skins were used to replace missing parts of skulls back in the Neolithic times as part of primitive surgery. This is seen as evidence of prostheses, that is, artificial bones made of very fine gold sheet and gourd skins, which were inserted in the skull under the skin or to cover the hole left by the operation.

The harder outer surface lends the gourd to a wide variety of creative appeals, including carving, sculpture, basketry, masks, musical instruments, and much more. A steadily growing following has emerged in the United States and other Western countries for Gourd Art and craft-related purposes. There are many different types of decorative gourds. They include spoon gourds, spoon bicolor, orange warted, and striped pear. The spoon gourd ripens from the top to the bottom. A baby spoon gourd is green and as it grows it changes color. A yellow color overlaps the green and creates a two colored gourd. For decorative purposes the harvester can cut the gourd from the plant early when it is still two colors.

Gourds are ready for harvest when the stems dry and turn brown. Gourds should be cut from the vine with a few inches of the stem attached. Care is taken not to bruise the gourds during harvest, as this increases the likelihood of decay during the curing process. After harvesting, gourds can be cleaned with soap and water, dried, and rubbing alcohol applied to the surface.

Curing gourds is a two-step process which may take 1 to 6 months depending on the type and size of the gourd. Surface drying is the first step in the curing process, and takes approximately one week. During this time, the skin hardens and the exterior color of the gourd is set.

Internal drying is the second step in curing and takes a minimum of four weeks. Keep the gourds in shallow containers in a dark, warm, well-ventilated area. Periodically, the fruit is turned to discourage shriveling and promote even curing. Providing warmth during the internal curing process can accelerate drying and discourage decay. Adequate curing is achieved when the gourd becomes light in weight and the seeds can be heard rattling inside. Cured gourds are typically painted, waxed, or decorated.

Creek Indians in America used gourds for centuries as Purple Martin Bird houses as well as for storing and protecting their corn from the animals.

The American Gourd Society promotes interest in all activities relating to gourds: cultivation, historical uses, gourd show competition, craftwork, and artistic decoration.

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