

## FUN WITH GOURDS

By Steve Dawkins, Master Gardener

You see them everywhere, on the cover of home design magazines, in upscale home furnishing stores, at discount retailers and in your favorite wild bird establishment. What are these ubiquitous things? They are Gourds! You are about to find out everything you wanted to know about gourds but were afraid to ask.

Gourds come from the family *Cucurbitacea* which has the general characteristics of growing on a vine that produces fruit. The vines are *monoecious* which means the male and female flowers grow on the same vine. Pollination can be very interesting, but we will get to this risqué part later.

The *Cucurbit* family is very large and the genera most people identify with gourds are the *Lagenaria* (hardshell) and the *Cucurbit pepo* (ornamental), the kind you see at grocery stores around Thanksgiving. This article will concentrate on the propagation and use of hardshell gourds.

Hardshell gourds come in all shapes and sizes from round to bottle type, from dipper to snake shaped. When dried, these gourds have been used by civilizations around the world as cooking utensils, storage containers or as religious objects. The oldest evidence of hardshell gourds dates back thousands of years B.C. Gourds have been replaced by more modern and sophisticated material but their use, beauty and versatility have again been discovered by consumers as I referred to in the beginning of the article.

Gourds are propagated from seed. Because gourds hybridize so easily it is important to buy plant seeds that you are sure will mature to the size and shape you want. Seeds can be purchased over the internet, or seeds or seedlings can be purchased from local nurseries.

Gourds like full sun, at least six hours. Rich soil a bit on the acid side 6-7 pH, plenty of water and four to five months of frost free days to mature. Since gourds are susceptible to mildew, a drip system is ideal for irrigation. Gourds require a lot of room. They are vines and they can grow as much as 100 feet in a season. The ideal way to grow hardshell gourds is on some type of vertical support such as a trellis, arbor, fence or other sturdy structure. Depending on the variety, a gourd at harvest can weigh over 10 pounds.

Pollination is one of the more interesting aspects of hardshell gourds. Because they bloom at night, it is more difficult for pollination from daytime flying insects. Hardshell male blossoms bloom at night and last only one day so I have found hand pollination to be a more effective way to ensure an abundant crop. I usually go out early in the morning, just before the flowers have completely closed, and using a small brush, I take the pollen from several male flowers and dust the female blossom with the pollen. I have found this process to double or triple my crop. The male blossoms have fine stamen which are topped by anthers that carry the pollen. The female blossoms are distinguished by three two-lobed stigma which curl up from the center of the flower.

Once the gourds have reached maturity it is best to leave them on the vine until at least November in our area. If cut too soon, hardshell gourds will rot rather than dry and harden. I have lost many a gourd because of wanting to clean up the yard before winter. If they can't be left on the vine to dry, then be sure the stem is brown when you pick them and store in a dry place with good ventilation. As the gourd dries it will develop a mold on the outside that can be unsightly but that is part of the curing process. In six months the gourd will lose all its moisture and become hard and dry.

Once the gourd is cured the fun now begins. First, in soapy water, using a mesh sponge, wash all the dry mold off the gourd. There may be some discoloration that remains but that adds to the beauty. Left in their natural state gourds can be quite attractive. For the more ambitious, there is an unlimited number of artistic opportunities.

Gourds make wonderful bird houses. They make a superb medium for wood burning, carving, painting or weaving. Hardshell gourds are easy to cut into many intriguing shapes. I have made musical instruments, vases and pitchers. Your imagination is your only limit as to the versatility of this easy to grow, fun to decorate member of the *Cucurbitaceae* family.

Source for article: [Gourds in Your Garden](#) by Ginger Summit

If you want to pursue growing and decoration gourds, I recommend you attend the annual Gourd Festival in Folsom in September, or contact The Caning Shop in Berkeley.