



Ornamental & Birdhouse Gourds

WHAT ARE GOURDS?

Gourds are among the oldest cultivated plants. They were the early water bottles of the Egyptians, and have been used for utensils, storage containers, and dippers for centuries.

Botanically speaking, there's really no difference between gourds, squash, and pumpkins. They all belong to the family *Cucurbitaceae*. And they are all frost-tender.

TYPES OF GOURDS

There are three general types of gourds:

ORNAMENTAL GOURDS

- Soft-shell gourds are American native, *Cucurbita* types. They are the decorative ornamental gourds that come in unusual shapes, textures and multi-color combinations, including orange, yellow, green, white, and blue. Soft-shell gourds are not long-lasting like hard-shell gourds.

BOTTLE GOURDS

- Hard-shell gourds are *Lagenaria siceraria* which means "drinking vessel." Speckled swan gourds, bottle gourds, birdhouse gourds, dipper gourds, penguin or powder horn gourds, and even one called caveman's club are all *Lagenarias*. Hard-shelled gourds will last for several years and have been grown for over five thousand years for use as containers and utensils. Immature gourds are edible. Even today, these gourds have many uses, including birdhouses, storage vessels, dippers, ornaments, and musical instruments. Hard-shelled gourds tend to start out in a shade of green, perhaps mottled with white. After drying or curing, they age to a tan or brown color.

SPONGE GOURDS

- *Luffa aegyptiaca* or *L. cylindrical* is the well-known bath sponge! Many people think Luffas are sponges from the sea, but these vegetable sponges are related to cucumbers. Left to mature and dry, the outer shell is scraped off and the scratchy inner fiber makes a great scrubby!

The size and shape of your gourds will depend on the variety you grow; however, most have extensive vines. Squash vines can be pruned if they start to take over your garden. The fruits of the hard-skinned varieties tend to be larger and

often have long, thin necks. Soft-skinned gourds can range from small enough to cup in your hand to larger than a pumpkin.

GOURD SPECS

Botanical Name	Lagenaria spp., Cucurbita spp.
Common Name	Ornamental gourd
Plant Type	Annual
Mature Size	Varies
Sun Exposure	Full sun
Soil Type	Rich, well-drained
Soil pH	Neutral (6.5 to 6.8)
Bloom Time	Spring
Flower Color	Yellow, white
Hardiness Zones	3 to 10 (USDA)
Native Area	Africa, North America
Toxicity	Non-toxic (but inedible)

HOW TO PLANT GOURDS

Gourds are slow-growing and take the entire season to mature (75 to 120 days or more). In addition, if you leave them on the vine to dry, you may not harvest them for up to 180 days after planting.

Gourds are a warm-season crop. (Seeds planted in cold, wet soil will probably rot before germinating.) If spring is slow to come, you can get a **head start by starting seeds indoors about four to six weeks before the last frost. Use peat or paper pots to minimize transplant shock.** Transplant them outside in the spring after danger of frost has passed.

Plant ornamental gourds in a similar fashion to squash and pumpkins: in hills of two plants spaced 4 to 5 feet apart, with about 6 to 7 feet between rows of hills. Plant hard shell bottle or birdhouse gourds 12-16 inches apart in a row supported on trellises or fences.

Different varieties will have different growth habits, but most gourd fruits develop best if the plants are raised off the ground onto a trellis or support and the fruits are allowed to hang. They will grow cleaner, straighter and they won't get that discolored spotting that occurs when the fruits touch the ground.

As with other members of the Cucurbitaceae family, gourds can have trouble with pollination. If pollinators are not abundant in the area, you may have to pollinate by hand, by removing the male blossoms and dusting them onto the female blossoms. The female blossoms can be distinguished by the tiny immature fruit at the base of the flower. It is normal for there to be several male blossoms produced before you spot a female blossom. Hard skinned gourds bloom in the evening and at night. Soft skinned gourds bloom during the day.

GOURD CARE

Light

Plant your gourds in full sun, for the most flowers and the healthiest fruit.

Soil

Gourds require well-draining soil with a neutral pH of about 6.5 to 6.8 The vigorous vines are heavy feeders, and soil rich in organic matter will improve yield. It's really best to prepare the soil a few months in advance with lots of rich organic matter such as compost so that the soil settles down by spring planting.

Water

Give the plants a light watering immediately after planting, then once every two to three days for two to three weeks. After that, water the base of the plant about 1 inch per week. Never water the leaves, as it can damage the plant.

Temperature and Humidity

If starting from seed, start indoors between 60 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Outside, ornamental gourds do best in temperatures between 75 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

Fertilizer

You can feed by side-dressing with compost or by applying a balanced fertilizer when the vines start to bloom. The long gourd vines can be self-mulching, but use caution when weeding, since gourds have shallow roots. If you do use a synthetic fertilizer, use a slow-release fertilizer.

Pruning

Cut back the vines once they reach 10 feet to encourage the growth of female blossoms, which produce fruit, on the side stems.

HARVESTING AND CURING GOURDS

Ornamental soft-shell gourds can be picked when fully mature and the stems dry out and turn brown and tendrils next to them are dry. Harvest before frost. Cut the gourds with a few inches of stem intact. Do not use the stems as handles. Wax or shellac mature fruits for year round decorations.

Hard-shell gourds should be left in the garden on the vine to dry out. They will tolerate light frost so allow them to dry on the vine as long as possible. They can finish curing on a rack in a protected airy space. They are completely dry when you can hear the seeds rattle inside when shaken. The skin will fade and discolor and even show signs of mold. As long as the shell does not rot, it will continue to dry inside. It can take 3 to 6 months for them to dry completely, depending on how thick the shell is. When the gourd is totally dry, drill a hole 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter and a few tiny holes in the bottom for drainage. For a longer lasting birdhouse varnish or shellac.

Luffas should be left on the vine until the stem is dry and the gourds are turning brown at both ends. The seeds will rattle inside when you shake them. Peel off the outer skin and the inner fiber should be tan and dry.

COMMON PESTS AND DISEASES

Gourds are susceptible to the same problems as other members of the squash family. Insects include aphids, cucumber beetle, squash bug and squash vine borer. Hand picking and using floating row covers early in the season help to minimize pest problems.

Diseases such as angular leaf spot, bacterial wilt, mosaic virus, and powdery mildew can be controlled with fungicides and crop rotation. It also helps to remove plant debris in the fall and allow for air circulation between the plants, especially in wet or humid weather.

Tip: To counteract powdery mildew, make a simply spray solution of 1 cup skim milk (ONLY skim) and 5 cups of water. Spray plants every week for 3 weeks until leaves develop.

Sources:

www.thespruce.com/growing-a-variety-of-ornamental-gourds-1403515

The Spruce, "Ornamental Gourd Plant Profile" by Marie Iannotti updated 1/9/21

www.almanac.com/types-gourds

The Old Farmer's Almanac: Gourds: Types of Gourds, Growing Gourds, Curing Gourds

"Grow Ornamental Gourds!" by Robin Sweetser 10/8/2020

www.burpee.com – take a look at the wonderful variety of gourds: Ornamental, bottle gourd (for birdhouses), daisy gourd, speckled swan gourd, squash gourd for luffa sponges, extra long handle dipper gourd & apple gourd.

www.hartseed.com