



Growing Ancient Gourds Produces Today's Art

By Jan Cleere

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Gourds are considered one of the oldest known plants on earth. In the Southwest, Native Americans grew and used gourds centuries before pottery became the pots and pans of choice.

Ladles, canteens, tortilla warmers, masks and musical instruments were constructed from these curiously-shaped vegetables.

Gourds belong to the Cucurbitacea family that includes watermelons, pumpkins and zucchini, but differ by producing hard, impenetrable shells. Wild gourds can be found growing alongside many Arizona highways.

Today, three of the over 100 species of gourds are grown for artwork.

The Cucurbita or ornamental gourd is easiest to grow, adapting well to dry, sandy soils and producing orange or yellow blossoms pollinated by bees.

The Lagenaria gourd is larger and sturdier than the Cucurbita with its white blossoms appearing at night and relying on moths for pollination.

The Luffa gourd or vegetable sponge produces yellow blossoms and requires the longest growing season.

Seeds should be planted after the last frost – mid-February in southern Arizona to mid-April through June in the north. Some gardeners roughen seeds with sandpaper before planting, making them more permeable to air and water. Others prefer to start crops indoors about four weeks before outside planting season.

Soak the seeds for 24 hours and plant 1/2 to 1 inch deep, about 2 feet apart in rows 5 feet apart, with three seeds in each hole.

A light, well-drained soil is best but gourds can grow in anything from rich peat moss to sand. An abundant water supply means more to growing gourds than good soil.

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Male blooms appear on the main vine about two weeks before female blossoms show up on side branches, distinguishable by a "pregnant pouch" or small round bulb at the base. When the main vine is about 10 feet long, trim it to encourage side branches and, ergo, female blossoms.

Some gardeners let nature take its course and accept whatever the bees and moths pollinate. Others like to control their gourds' destinies by regulating pollination to ensure a pure gourd species.

One such hand pollination technique involves using an artist's paintbrush or cotton swab and transferring male pollen to female blossoms, then tying off the female blooms to discourage additional pollination.

Stringy gourd vines cling to anything nearby and require a trellis, fence or sturdy tree to climb and to keep gourds off the ground.

A brick placed under each gourd helps those that must rest on the ground from rotting.

Gourd growing season can last from 90 to 180 days before the stems blacken and shrivel. They can be left on the vines during winter, placed on pallets or hung to dry allowing adequate ventilation.

Gourds have an unpredictable drying season lasting one to 12 months, and will change from green to yellow to myriad shades of brown. Listen for the seeds to start rattling inside.

Once dried, soaking in warm water and scrubbing with an SOS pad or kitchen scrubber removes the outside layer, although some artists prefer to leave the outer skin intact and design around mold formations produced during curing.

An Exacto knife works well in cutting into dried gourds and scrapping out any inside waste. Hot water, bleach and laundry detergent loosen stubborn stains, and a good deck stain cleans off mold and mildew. Sand for a smoother surface.

Finishing and decorative touches abound for gourd crafters. Any paint used on wood can be applied to gourds as well as leather dyes, furniture polish and glosses. Wood burning produces unique pieces of gourd art. Use your imagination!

Most libraries have a selection of books on growing and crafting gourds, or visit the Southwest Gourd Association web site at <http://ag.arizona.edu/maricopa/garden/html/clubs/gourd.htm>.