



The Ancient Gift of Gourds

By Jan Cleere

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My pale green thumb twisted the tangled gourd vines around the rabbit fence trying to keep their tentacles from choking the photinia plants to which they seemed so attached. Small children and slow moving animals should keep their distance from the long stringy appendages that grasp onto any wall, fence, or plant within reach. These funny-looking squash had appeared in my garden unannounced and I wondered from whence they came.

Archaeologists and ethnobotanists believe gourds existed as long ago as 10,000 B.C. In the Southwest, Native Americans grew and used gourds centuries before pottery became the pots and pans of choice. Ancient tribes left behind fragments of gourds that served as ladles, canteens, tortilla warmers, masks, and a vast array of musical instruments.

Gourds belong to the Cucurbitacea family that includes watermelons, pumpkins, and zucchini, distinguishing themselves by producing a hard, impenetrable shell, impervious to critters looking for a tasty snack. Pumpkin-shaped Buffalo gourds and slim-necked Bottle gourds grow wild along many of Arizona's highways.

Buffalo gourds emit a strong odor whenever their triangular grayish-green leaves rustle in the wind, a smell reputed to be similar to a herd of pungent buffalo. The roots and fruit contain a substance called saponin that produces suds, which Sonoran desert tribes used as laundry soap, shampoo, and bleach long before Tide and Clorox became household names. Old memories still linger with Tohono O'odham tribal elder and educator Danny Lopez of Sells, Arizona, as he recalls his mother cutting small gourds in half and swishing them around in the water to generate soap on washday.

Today, Lopez teaches youngsters how to carve rhythmic rattles from gourds using methods that have been handed down through generations of O'odham families. After hollowing, boiling, and drying in the sun, the gourd rattles are colorfully painted or left their natural hide-tan color. Palo Verde seeds or small pebbles placed inside provide a

Jan Cleere
Author and Freelance Writer
www.janCleere.com
jan@janCleere.com

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one-tone beat that must resonate to the crafter's ear before a handle, made from dried saguaro spines or pieces of wood, is attached. The handle was once secured with the gummy secretion from creosote bushes, but today Elmer's Glue serves the same purpose. Once the children have completed their rattles, Lopez teaches them the songs of long ago. "It's important to save your family's songs and for individuals to have their own songs," he says, encouraging the creation of new songs while retaining the old.

As natural resonators, gourds have been crafted into musical instruments in almost every recorded culture. Many modern instruments evolved from ancient gourd rattles, stringed instruments, xylophones, scrapers (rubbing a gourd against a board, wire, or sticks), and wind instruments (nose whistles, horns, flutes, and trumpets). Yaqui musicians still use half a large gourd inverted over water to produce the unique sound of a water drum.

Ancient tribes believed gourds linked the visible world to the invisible and, when split apart, symbolized heaven and earth with the seeds representing the fish from the sea and the creatures on earth. Gourds carved into fetishes repelled evil spirits. Hopis, Apaches, Pimas, and Yaquis cut large gourds in half and sculpted masks symbolic of spiritual beings.

Along with spiritual powers, gourds were thought to provide a host of medicinal remedies. Rubbing pulp on open sores supposedly deterred infection in both humans and animals. Gourd leaves steeped and mashed into a poultice eased muscle swelling. Powdered gourd roots mixed with water produced a tonic believed to relieve headaches, toothaches, earaches, even constipation. Pregnant women drank the extract of gourd roots to induce labor.

Scattered along the Gila River, fragments of ancient gourds suggest Hohokam communities ground and cooked gourd seeds and pulp into an edible mush. They left no clues as to the tastiness of this dish, for gourds are notoriously bitter and foul tasting, but do contain large amounts of oil and protein similar to soybeans and peanuts. Hopis stirred snowy-white Buffalo gourd flowers into cornmeal cakes, and Papago women mixed fresh gourd blossoms into soups.

The Akimel O'odham, who resettled the old Hohokam farmlands along the Gila River, cultivated thin-skinned Bottle gourds. Bottle gourd fishing bobbbers allowed lines to float atop river waters. Mothers bathed and cradled their babies in larger, hollowed-out gourds, sometimes feeding them from smaller ones.

Native communities held ceremonies before planting and cultivating gourds with only selected individuals or groups allowed to sow the seeds and tend the crops to ensure proper cultivation. O'odham farmers planted near irrigation ditches lined with bushes and trees as the gourd's trailing stringers, growing up to 20 feet long, demanded a plentiful water supply and a natural trellis for climbing.

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Piles of small drying gourds attracted native youngsters who found them well suited for sports and games. O'odham athletes played baseball without the worry of breaking windows, although many a dry, brittle gourd never made it past the first pitch. Another popular game involved a large gourd cut into rings of multiple dimensions, pressed hard and flat, then left to dry. The dried rings were tossed in the air and speared on a stick. Beans and pebbles moved along a flat, spiral-designed basket calculated the score.

Today, gourds are grown primarily for use as musical instruments or as ornaments and decorations, but researchers are delving into other possible functions for this curiously enduring plant. Because the root systems of gourds contain such high starch content and produce large amounts of oil, researchers are exploring commercial and industrial applications. The gourd's proclivity for producing soap and bleach properties may lead to possible uses in underdeveloped countries. The Buffalo gourd's massive root system produces a slow-burning, clean fire that could grow in desert areas lacking sufficient firewood. Some cancer research is being conducted utilizing gourd byproducts.

Many Native Americans, wanting to preserve the heritage of their ancestors, still plant their own gourds and continue to craft musical instruments. Native Seeds/SEARCH store on 4th Avenue in Tucson supplies gourd and other native seeds to those who wish to grow historic crops. As part of their mission statement, Native Seeds/SEARCH strives "to conserve the traditional crops, seeds, and farming methods that have sustained native peoples throughout the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico." Easy to grow, gourds require nothing more than nature's diet of earth and water for nourishment.

One of the oldest cultivated plants in the world has appeared in my garden, a gift from ancient times, ancient peoples. My garden is bountiful.