K-STATE Research and Extension

Ornamental Gourds

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Gourds of all types have been used for centuries. Remains of gourds have been found in the tombs of Egypt. During ancient times, most gourds were used as utensils and storage containers.

More recently, gourds have been selected for their ornamental value to be used in arrangements with other decorative materials. Smaller gourds in yellow, white and green are popular. The most common shapes are pear, round, egg-shaped, Turk's turban, penguin and finger. The sponge gourd and larger gourds in the shape of dippers or bottles also have practical uses.

Gourds commonly grown for ornamental uses and utensils include species of the genera Cucurbita, Lagenaria and Luffa. Smaller ornamental gourds are mainly *Cucurbita pepo*, variety ovifera; turban squashes are *Cucurbita maxima*, variety turbaniformis; large dipper gourds and bottle gourds are the genus Lagenaria, and dishcloth (also called sponge) gourds are *Luffa cylindrica*.

Purchasing Seed

Gourds are annual vines easily grown from seed. Gourd seed may be purchased by individual varieties or pack mixtures at local garden stores or through seed catalogs. There are 150 to 500 seeds per ounce, depending on the variety.

Culture

Select a well-drained, fertile soil in a sunny location for planting. Sow seeds where the plants will not have to be moved unless they are started indoors and later transplanted. Care should be taken not to disturb the root system when transplanting. Plant seeds 1 inch deep. They germinate in 1 to 3 weeks at a temperature of 70°F. Individual plants should have at least 18 square feet of growing area, since the vines grow vigorously to a length of 12 to 15 feet. Growing vines on a trellis, livestock panel or a fence saves space and keeps the fruit cleaner.

Because young plants are very sensitive to cold, it is recommended that seed be sown after all danger of frost has passed. During the growing season a temperature range of 70 to 85° is desirable during the day, with night temperatures above 50°F. Gourds need a growing season of 120 to 140 days to produce a good crop of mature fruit.

Fertilizer helps to promote vigorous growth. Mix in 1 pound of 11-15-11 or similar fertilizer for each 100 square feet of area before the seeds are sown. Sidedress an additional 1 pound of 11-15-11 or similar fertilizer on the area and work into the soil around the plants about a month after planting.

Water the plants adequately during dry weather. However, a reduced water supply during late summer and early fall will promote ripening of the fruit. Because gourds have a shallow root system, care should be taken when cultivating around the plants to control weeds. A 1-inch mulch of wood chips, peat moss, bark chips or similar material applied around the plants helps to conserve moisture and control weeds. Ornamental gourds have the same disease and insect problems as pumpkin and winter squash. For best results, use the insect and disease control measures suggested for pumpkin and squash.

Harvesting and Curing

Small ornamental gourds have a thick flesh and need special attention when harvesting. The fruit should be fully mature when picked. When the stem of the fruit begins to dry, carefully cut the fruit from the vine, leaving a small piece of the stem attached to the end of the fruit. This adds interest to the gourd and prevents disease from entering the fruit.

Be careful not to bruise or scratch the fruit. Any damage may ruin its appearance or cause the fruit to rot. Wipe each fruit with a cloth dampened with rubbing alcohol to remove soil and disease organisms. Very dirty fruit may be washed with soap and a disinfectant.

The clean gourds should be dried and cured for about a week in a warm, well-ventilated area. Handle gourds carefully during the drying period. Space the fruits so they are not touching each other. During this period, the skin will become hard and tough. After 1 to 3 more weeks the fruit should be thoroughly dried. Large gourds, such as dipper gourds, have a thin rind and will cure and dry faster than the small, thick-fleshed gourds. To aid in drying, small holes may be made in the bottom of the fruit with an ice pick. Three to five holes may be made depending on the size of the fruit. The ice pick should be treated with disinfectant before use.

Preservation and Use

Properly cured and dried gourds may hold their color for a year or more. For added preservation and enhanced appearance, coat the gourds with clear shellac. This will give a gloss to the surface of the gourd. Spray enamel in various colors or metallic colors, such as silver or gold, may be applied to dull or faded gourds.

Gourds are most useful during the fall and winter seasons. The natural colors are in greatest demand during the fall season. Metallic colors are popular for the winter decorations or in holiday table arrangements. Other uses include door designs and wall decorations. Natural or painted gourds can be used in arrangements with dried or fresh materials.

Painting and Decorating Gourds and Pumpkins

Gourds, pumpkins and some types of squash lend themselves to painting and decorating. For example, instead of the traditional carving of a pumpkin for Halloween, paint a face on the gourd or pumpkin. Gourds can be painted with caricatures, cartoons, and other designs. Butternut squash, with its unique shape and smooth surface, also can be painted. A simple, no-mess approach is to wipe the pumpkin surface clean and use marking pens to create the design or drawing.

Decorating pumpkins, squashes and gourds or using these materials in table arrangements is a true test of the imagination. With the use of paper or plant materials and careful selection of a pumpkin, gourd or squash, it is possible to make animal figures, cartoon characters or other unique designs. Straw flowers, dried grass, twigs or tree branches, other fruits, nuts or seed pods all make suitable materials for creating a figure or design with pumpkins, gourds, and squashes. A combination of painting and added decoration can be used to obtain the desired effect.

Etching

Gourds can be etched with a design or letters on the surface using a fairly sharp object while they are still growing. The gourd responds to this injury by forming scar or callous tissue over the pattern of the etch. A gourd should have reached at least two-thirds to three-fourths of its full size for etching. Smaller fruit may deteriorate or rot when etched.

To etch, use the narrow end of a paring knife or a small metal file, or the blunt, sharp end of a heavy piece of wire. A ballpoint pen usually does not work well. Etching causes a clear fluid to form over the wounded tissue. Narrow lines marked on the fruit tend to produce raised scar tissue, whereas broadly wounded areas will generally result in flat scar tissue. Etching pumpkins can be fun and may cause some unique, innovative and personalized gourds for fall decorations and Halloween.

Ward Upham, Horticulturist

Revised from original by Charles W. Marr, (retired) vegetable crops specialist.

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