



Ornamental Gourds

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Along with the abundant fall harvest of fruits and vegetables, often fancy, colorful, ornamental gourds are offered for sale at grocery stores and farm stands. Growing top quality gourds can be an interesting experience and is not difficult as long as their cultural requirements are met, the fruits allowed to mature on the vines, and they receive proper postharvest care.

While we delight in their decorative value, in other parts of the world, gourds are still made into useful and ceremonial objects. In times past, gourds were frequently used in religious rituals. Gourds are believed to be a lucky token to the Japanese, and it was thought that a set of six gourds could improve health and spiritual power and that they would produce six fortunes.

The more decorative gourds are members of the cucurbit family which also includes squashes, cucumbers, pumpkins, and melons. These yellow flowering gourds come in many wonderful shapes – round, oval, long-necked, turban, warted and crowned. They may be cream, orange, or green in color with stripes, spots and bicolors being not uncommon. Mexico is believed to be their country of origin.

Another group of gourds is from the *Lagenaria* genus. These are larger in size and plants produce white flowers. This is a very old genus with some types used as water bottles as early as 2400 BC. Sometimes called bottle, birdhouse or sugar-trough gourds, they generally require a longer growing season than we have some years in New England so they are best started indoors and set out as transplants to give them a head start.

Both the above-mentioned varieties are rapid growing, tendril bearing vining plants. Trellising will keep the fruits off the ground and also save space. Gourds should be planted in full sun in a fertile, well-drained soil with a pH level around 6.5. Because they produce an extensive root system, space plants at least four feet apart. If mesh fencing is used, no tying is needed as the tendrils will hold the vines in place. Otherwise, it is necessary to start tying vines to their support when they reach about three feet in length.

Although somewhat tolerant to drought, keep plants well watered until they become established. A black fabric or organic mulch may be used at the base of the plants. Without a soil test, work in 2 to 3 pounds per 100 square feet of a 10-10-10 fertilizer or the organic equivalent. A side dressing in midsummer of about one-quarter to one-half cup of 5-10-10, worked in about 6 to 8 inches from the base of the plant followed by a thorough watering, will benefit the rapidly growing vines.

Cucurbita varieties ripen earlier than the Lagenaria types. When fully mature, Cucurbita gourds will become very hard. Gently press the surface of the gourd being careful not to break the skin to test for ripeness.

Lagenaria gourds turn from green to tan when fully ripe. If left on the vine long enough, the seeds become dry and will rattle when shaken. Frost will not harm mature fruits, but immature green ones need to be collected before the first frost.

Harvest gourds on a clear, cool day and leave an inch or so of stem attached. Avoid scratching or bruising the gourds as this will encourage decay and shorten the shelf life. Wash fruits in warm, soapy water to which a little bleach is added; then rinse and pat dry. Use fresh in bowls or other arrangements.

Drying gourds for crafts or decoration can take a few weeks to several months depending on their size. Look up specific directions for the gourds you are planning on drying. Drying typically consists of placing gourds on several layers of paper towels in a warm, sunny room, ideally at 80 to 85 degrees F. Turn them every day or two and cull any gourds that start showing signs of rot. After a week, wipe them again with a dilute disinfectant and this time place in a warm, dark spot for several weeks, checking on them and turning every few days. When seeds rattle, the gourds are dry and ready to use for craft projects or to varnish.

For information about growing gourds, or for questions on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

