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The Culture and Use of Ornamental Gourds



A collection of gourds which illustrates the many various shapes, sizes and colors that can be found.

Ornamental gourds belong to the *Cucurbitaceae* family which includes the melons, squashes and pumpkins. The term gourd, however, is usually applied to hard shelled, non-edible types suitable for ornaments or utensils.

Kinds of Gourds

Most of the commonly grown gourds belong to two genera: *Cucurbita* and *Lagenaria*.

The *Cucurbita* are highly colored and fancifully shaped. The surface may be either smooth or warty, colored or plain, striped or ridged. The ornamental forms occur mainly in the species *C. Pepo* var. *ovifera* in variations such as the apple, bell, egg, bicolor, orange and pear gourds; and *C. maxima* var. *turbaniformis*, the turban squashes. The *Cucurbita* produce yellow flowers, and are native to the Americas. The fruits are subject to frost damage and must be harvested before cold weather. They do not usually last more than one season.

The *Lagenaria*, commonly called bottle or dipper gourds, produce white flowers and are native to the Old World tropics. The fruit is usually smooth, but may be ridged or knobby. The length varies from three inches to three feet, and the shape may be glove or disk-like, bottle, dumbbell, club, crookneck or coiled.

The mature fruit of the *Lagenaria* are not damaged by frost. The immature fruits may be damaged, however, so it is best to harvest the *Lagenaria* along with the more tender *Cucurbita*. The thin shell becomes extremely hard and durable and will last for several years. They may be used as dippers, storage vessels, bird houses and ornaments.

Culture

Gourds are warm weather plants. Plant the seed after frost in good fertile soil. To obtain a head start, start the seeds indoors. Refer to the leaflet titled *Using Average Frost Dates to Start Vegetable Seeds*, which is available on the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site.

The vines may grow several hundred feet long, but growth is not in a straight line so there is no problem if the plants are not too closely spaced. Train the vines onto fences or trellises to conserve space and to insure more perfectly formed and evenly colored fruit. If no support is available, place cardboard, slate or roofing paper under the developing fruits to keep them off the ground. Rotate the gourds so that all sides are exposed to the sun.

Harvesting

The first fruits will mature in late summer. A browning and drying of the stem is evidence that the gourd is ripe. The “fingernail” test is frequently mentioned as a maturity test. This is not recommended, however, because a break or dent in the shell of an unripe gourd destroys its future value. Except for the first few well-ripened, fruits, the best treatment is to leave the gourds on the vines until frost threatens. Harvest in the afternoon of the first clear, cold fall day that portends frost. Use a sharp shears or knife and leave a few inches of the stem attached to avoid bruising the fruit. This stem sometimes drops off as the gourd dries, but if it remains intact it may enhance the decorative effect.

Post-Harvest Treatment

Washing – Wash the gourds in warm, soapy water and rinse them in clean water to which a household disinfectant has been added. This removes any soil –borne bacteria clinging to the shell. Dry each gourd with a soft cloth to avoid bruising or scratching the tender skin.

Surface Drying – To remove surface moisture, spread the gourds out on several layers of newspaper in a warm, dry place. A sun porch or a sunny window is ideal. On sunny days, the fruit may be put outside, but it must be brought indoors before the dew falls. Space the gourds so that they do not touch. This allows air to circulate and speeds drying. Turn the fruits daily and replace newspapers that are dampened by moisture absorbed from the gourds.

Surface drying takes about one week. During this time, the outer skin hardens and surface color sets. Some fruits that are not mature will begin to shrivel or develop soft spots. These gourds should be discarded to prevent the developing molds and bacterial from spreading to the healthy gourds.

Final Drying – Wipe the gourds with a soft cloth soaked in household disinfectant; then spread them on newspapers in a warm, dry, dark place for three to four weeks. An attic is ideal for final drying. Other locations might be a closet floor, a dry, warm basement, or under a bed or chest of drawers. Heat encourages rapid drying; darkness prevents fading of color; and dryness discourages mold and mildew.

Display Treatments

Display gourds in their natural state or treat them in one of the following ways:

Wax gourds with paste wax, then buff with a soft cloth to produce a soft shiny surface with highlights.

Shellac gourds to give a hard, glossy finish.

Paint gourds that have a poor, dull color. Use spray or regular paint in flat or enamel finish. Paint the entire gourd by suspending it by the stem, or set the painted gourds on the rims of empty cans to dry.

Gild gourds with silver or gold paint. A bright, shiny gilt can be applied with brush or spray paint, or a dull sheen can be produced by applying shellac and shaking the gourds in a paper bag with gold or silver powder before the shellac is completely dry.

Arrangements

A combination of colors, designs and forms is most pleasing for ornamental display. From an aesthetic point, it is not good practice to combine natural, gilded or painted treatments in a single arrangement.

Fresh flowers, such a pompon chrysanthemums, make arrangements of gourds more festive. Small tubes of water concealed among the gourds can keep the flowers fresh. Ivy, or autumn leaves can also be put in water tubes.

Bittersweet and other dried berries and seed pods add contrast in line, color and form.

Grapes, lemons, oranges, apples and other fruits lend a colorful effect to an arrangement of natural gourds. For a more lasting effect some of the real-looking artificial fruits might be used instead of the fresh fruits.

Gilded gourds combined with gilded oak or magnolia leaves make a very elegant display.

Small wads of floral clay can be used to fasten gourds to a base, and to fasten them to each other.

Utilitarian Treatments

In addition to decorative uses, the *Lagenaria* gourds are utilitarian. The long, crook-necked shapes can be cut into dippers and scoops. The round, bottle or cylindrical forms can serve as storage vessels. The bottle gourds make excellent bird houses.

Drill a small hole through the top of a bottle gourd for a hanging cord, and cut a hole in the side large enough to accommodate a wren or a blue bird. In some areas, a whole collection of these gourd houses hung in a tree may attract a colony of barn swallows or purple martins.

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