

Gourd Growing by Jessie Newberry

Gourds are in the same botanical family as cucumbers, squash and pumpkins. They require similar growing condition - good soil, full sun - and are bothered by the same pests, namely the squash borer and the cucumber beetle.

When: Start seeds indoors three to four weeks before your frost-free date. To set out around May 15th, start seeds in 4" to 6" pots indoors around April 15th. Large seeds (bushels, basketballs, African wine kettles) should have the corners ("shoulders") clipped. Soak all larger seeds overnight for better germination. If you don't want to start seeds indoors, you may plant them directly in the garden when you would normally plant cucumbers or tomatoes.

Where: A sunny spot in good garden soil. Mix compost in the planting hole if you can. Water weekly if it doesn't rain until the plants are growing nicely. After that, water only if the leaves look wilted. Avoid getting water on the leaves.

Bugs: Cucumber beetles are the main problem. Dust or spray plants with Sevin or Thiodan when you set them out, and thereafter whenever you see beetles. They are about 1/4" long and yellow with black stripes. Some are yellow-green with black spots. For a discussion of other problems and what to do about them, see Ginger Summit's book, [Gourds in Your Garden](#).

Weeds: Hoe, pull, till-whatever works for you. A straw mulch is helpful around the plant, but keep the mulch a few inches away from the stem. You don't want to encourage rot.

When to Harvest: When the vine dies, or after the first hard frost, gourds can be harvested. Store the gourds in a shed or out in the open, up off the ground. By spring they will be very light and tan-colored, with a coat of mold.

How to Clean: Soak the gourd in water about 30 minutes. Scrub with a copper or stainless steel kitchen scrubber, and the skin will come off. Your gourd is now ready to become a birdhouse, dipper, container, or other useful or imaginative object.

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Gourds are frost tender and will not tolerate any frost if unprotected. Approximate frost free dates are from May 15th to October 10th. This is a 148 day growing season. It is best to start seeds indoors 4 to 6 weeks before the average last frost day (May 15th) or earlier if using season extenders (ex. Wall-o-Water).

About Seeds

Obtain from reputable source
Save seed from existing gourds that have not been exposed to freezing.
Once seeds are completely dry, they can be frozen. (If seeds freeze when wet they will not germinate.)

Starting Seeds

Clip "shoulders" off hard seed coats and roll in wet paper towels.
Place in zip-locking bags to promote germination.
Check every couple of days for sprouting.
Keep warm (on top of hot water heater or heating pad).
When sprouted carefully place seeds in soil-less mix and place on heating pad.
Cover with plastic or seed tray cover.
As soon as leaves appear, remove cover and put under fluorescent lights suspended 2" above the new plants until ready to harden off.
Harden Off- This involves taking the gourdlings outside on nice days starting with a 2 hour limit and gradually extending the time each day to acclimate the gourdlings to outside condition.

Planting

Plant in fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 - 6.5
To raise pH: add lime, wood ashes, organic matter, calcified seaweed.
To lower pH: add sulfur, peat moss, evergreen needles, ground bark.
Ideal soil temperature is 70 degrees.
Preheat site with IRT-76 Green or Red Mulch or manure that is still "hot". Manure or compost as it decomposes generates it's own heat.
Garden site should get full sun.
Unless season extenders are used do not plant until after last frost.

Watering

Soaker hoses under IRT are best.
Keep soil moist without getting soggy. Gourds need lots of water.
Taper off water at the end of the season to signal maturation.

Cultivation

Use sturdy support structures.
When blossoms start to form, fertilize with 0-10-10.
When main vine is about 10 to 12 feet long nip it to force lateral or secondary vine growth.
Note, the main vine produces male flowers, the secondary, third and so forth produce female flowers which will become gourds if they are pollinated.
Train or shape your gourd while growing (knots, molds, etc.) if desired.
Allow the gourds to stay on the vine until after the first fall frost.

Pollination

Hardshell gourds bloom at night.
Luffa and ornamental gourds bloom during the day.
Nighttime insects pollinate gourds.
Honeybees pollinate Luffa and ornamental gourds.
Hand pollinate with a brush or pick a male flower and brush it on a female blossom.
Dust female blossom with more than one male.
Prevent further pollination by placing a plastic bag over the flower. Remove after flower can no longer be pollinated.
Do not spray when flowers are forming.