

Gourds

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Many people enjoy growing plants just for the fun of it. Sometimes though, the plants that we grow produce something that we can work with and make something out of. Though there are many things that come to mind, I am thinking of gourds. There are a lot of things that can be made out of gourds like ornaments, bird houses, and bowls. Growing and working with gourds has become so popular over the years that we even have a Florida Gourd Society.

For those of you who are interested in growing gourds pick a sunny spot to grow the vines. It's a good idea to grow these vines near a fence or arbor so they can grow up. To get a sandy area ready for the plants, spread composted cow manure and a complete fertilizer like 6-6-6 over the entire area where the vines will grow and then till it all in. After tilling, go ahead and spread another layer of compost or aged manure over the planting area about 3 inches deep. Plant the seeds directly outside after the first week in March. Plant three to four seeds per "hill", with the hills separated by several feet from each other. Water the seeds in after planting and keep the ground moist during germination. Mulch the areas in between the plants to keep the weeds down. After the seedlings are about two to three inches tall, snip off all but one seedling on each hill. Once the vines begin growing check them often for disease and insects. Usually, in our area, fungal leaf problems are worse than insect problems. To try and prevent a fungal disease or insect problem spray the foliage of the vines weekly with a fish emulsion and seaweed mixture. Spray both sides of the leaves until they drip. When the main vine reaches a length of about eight feet snip off the tip to encourage branching of the main vine. At this time fertilize with a product that is lower in nitrogen like 4-10-10 to help promote bloom growth. Male flowers usually start appearing first, and stand up prominently from the main vine, and then later the female flowers start appearing on the laterals. Gourds bloom at dusk and there is no mistaking the female flower because each one has a miniature gourd between the flower and the stem. Hand pollination is easy to do and will probably result in more gourds being produced. Just remove the male flower and shake or tap it so that as much pollen as possible falls onto the female flower. If the flower isn't pollinated the little gourd will shrivel up and fall off after a few days. While the gourd fruits are being produced be sure to give the plants plenty of water since the gourds are about 90% water.

Harvest the gourds, usually about four to five months after planting, when the stem leading from the vine to the gourd has turned brown. Hang the gourds in a room, garage or porch to dry. The gourds get very moldy during the several months it takes them to dry but this is OK because the mold will create attractive mottling and mosaic patterns on the surface of the gourd. After they are dried, their seeds will rattle when you shake them. Clean them with a plastic pot scrubber after soaking them for a half hour or so in warm water containing a little detergent and Chlorox. Be careful not to scratch the surface of the gourd so, don't use sandpaper.

Growing gourds can be a fun and rewarding activity. There is a wide variety of gourds to grow and a multitude of crafts to make with them. So, if you have an empty fence or arbor you may want to plant a few gourd seeds this spring.