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## ORNAMENTAL GOURDS (*Cucurbita pepo*)

Smaller than hard-shell gourds, ornamental gourds are very colorful and come in all sizes, shapes, and textures. This diversity lends them to their typical use in fall displays and decorations. Ornamental gourds have blossoms that are yellow like their close relatives, squash and pumpkins.

## HARD-SHELL GOURDS (*Lagenaria siceraria*)

Hard-shell gourds tend to be larger and less colorful, but can be dried to use for many types of crafting, from carved bowls to birdhouses. Plants of hard-shell varieties have very vigorous, vines that bear white flowers that bloom in the evening.

### SITE SELECTION:

Choose a location that receives full sun and has fertile, well-drained soil is best, with a pH of 5.8–6.8. Gourds grow well on sturdy trellises, especially the vigorous hard-shell types. Larger gourd fruits can be quite heavy and may need additional support, such as a bag or sling, to secure them to the vine and trellis.

### MULCH and ROW COVERS:

Plastic mulch and fabric row covers (AG-19 grade) can aid in plant establishment. In addition to the added warmth, mulch can suppress weeds and row covers also exclude insect pests. Most growers cover newly transplanted crops with row cover immediately after transplanting. Hoops are not needed to support the row cover.

Remove the row covers once the plants have female flowers to allow for pollination. A female flower can be identified by the tiny fruit developing at the base of the blossom. Poor fruit development may indicate insufficient pollination.

### TRANSPLANTING:

Hard-shell varieties require a long growing season and may perform the best when grown from transplants, especially in northern areas with short growing seasons.

Sow 2–3 seeds per 2-inch container or plug flat about 3 weeks prior to transplanting. If you are growing a mixed variety — such as 'Harrowsmith

Select' or 'Ornamental Gourds, Small Mixed' — sort the seeds into groups by shape and size prior to sowing. Sow similar seeds in each cell or container to increase the likelihood of obtaining the full mix of plant and fruit types. Thin to 1 plant per container or cell with scissors.

Harden off seedlings by gradually introducing them to outside conditions 4–7 days prior to transplanting. After the danger of frost has passed, transplant outside according to the in-row spacing needs for each variety. For in-row spacing information by variety, please refer to the chart in the catalog, or online in the Grower's Library.

- Small: 18–24 inches
- Medium: 24–36 inches
- Large: 36–48 inches

The between-row spacing for all varieties should fall between 6–12 feet. Handle the seedlings carefully; minimal root disturbance is best.

### DIRECT SEEDING:

Sow in late spring when soil temperature is at least 70°F/21°C, and all danger of frost has passed. If you are sowing a mixed variety, sort the seeds prior to sowing as described in the section on transplanting. Sow 2 seeds at each spacing interval, ½–1 inches deep. Thin to 1 plant per location after seedlings are established.

## **PRUNING:**

Gourd vines may benefit from pruning once they reach 8–10 feet long. Pruning will keep the vigorous vines in check and force the plants to produce lateral vines which will, in turn, produce more flowers and fruit. Simply clip the ends of the main vines once they reach the appropriate length.

## **INSECT PESTS:**

The common pests that impact other cucurbits also affect gourds. Among these are: cucumber beetles, squash bugs, and vine borers. Protect young plants with floating row cover. Reduce the habitat for insect pests by keeping the surrounding field borders mowed and removing plant refuse in the fall. Spring-plow the ground to bury any pupae.

## **HARVESTING AND CURING:**

### **Ornamental Gourds (*Cucurbita pepo*):**

For the best shelf-life, harvest these types when colors are fully developed and the stems are dry, but before a hard frost. Clip fruits from vines and cure out of direct sunlight at 80–85°F/27–29°C with good air ventilation for 5–7 days.

Wash fruits with warm, soapy water or another non-bleach disinfectant. Allow fruits to dry thoroughly. Fruits can be protected and given a glossy finish to bring out their colors with a furniture polish. Lacquers and shellacs are not recommended for preservation, as these do not allow the fruits to breathe, trapping moisture and causing them to rot from the inside.

Store fruits at 50–60°F/10–15°C, with 50–70% relative humidity and good ventilation until ready for display. Display out of direct sunlight to maintain skin color.

### **CRAFTING WITH HARD-SHELL GOURDS:**

The fruits are dry and ready to be processed for crafting when the skin begins to flake off; the shell/rind under the skin feels smooth, firm, and has a tan or light brown color; the fruit feels lighter and the dried seeds and pulp rattle when you shake the fruit (although this may not always happen). Fully submerge the dried fruits in warm, soapy water for about 1 hour and then remove any flaky and moldy skin with a dish scrubber. Allow fruits to dry and polish with steel wool or fine-grit sandpaper.

Hard-shell gourds may be treated like wood — they can be drilled, carved, chiseled, stained, painted, etc., and used to create many things, from bowls to musical instruments.

Squash bugs eggs found on the undersides on leaves may be crushed by hand. For vine borers, cut out of vines and hill soil over wound. Pyrethrin sprays may offer some control against a broad spectrum of pests.

## **DISEASES:**

Powdery mildew, downy mildew, bacterial wilt, viruses, and phytophthora blight are all known to afflict gourds, just as they do other cucurbits. Avoid problems through adequate soil drainage, good air flow, insect pest control, and crop rotation. If necessary, check with your local Cooperative Extension Service agent for specific fungicide recommendations.

### **Hard-shell Gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*):**

Fruits are mature and may be harvested when stems are brown and dry, but it is best to leave fruits on the vine for as long as possible — they will not be harmed by frost if mature. Fruits with significant damage or wounds should not be harvested, as they are unlikely to dry well, but minor scrapes and scratches that do not puncture the rind are okay.

Bring the fruits into a dry, protected area with good air ventilation and allow them to dry completely. Drying can take 3–6 months, depending on the size of the fruit. Mold may form on the fruits during the drying process, but it will not harm them and can give the dried fruits an interesting mottled pattern. If you do not desire this effect, wipe mold off with a mild disinfectant. The drying process can be quickened by drilling a hole in the base of the fruit that will allow moisture to drain, but the hole must be at least 1 inch in diameter to be effective which could make the fruit useless for some craft projects.

**Birdhouse:**

A popular gourd crafting project is the gourd birdhouse.

1. To make a birdhouse, start by drilling a 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch diameter entrance hole on one side of the gourd. The size of the entrance hole may need to be adjusted depending on the type of bird you would like to attract.
2. Drill 6–7,  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch diameter drainage holes in the bottom, and 2 more  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch diameter holes at the top for hanging.
3. Drill 4,  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch diameter holes about 2 inches from the top for ventilation.
4. Shake out any loose dried seeds or pulp.
5. Seal the outside with clear polyurethane or a high-gloss exterior paint.
6. Hang out of the reach of predators and wait for a new family to move in.