

Gourd Growing Information

Though I am no expert when it comes to growing gourds, I have grown them successfully on a small scale, so I decided to write an article to let you know of my experiences. Nothing beats getting out there and trying it for yourself. I hope this article will give you the confidence to give it a try.

I have experience growing Birdhouse gourds, Mini Birdhouse gourds, Nest Egg and Corsican gourds. These gourds seem to do well in my zone 5 gardens because they have the shortest growing season. If you live in a warmer zone, you can do research to see what will grow well in your area. If you have a greenhouse, you can extend your growing season significantly and try other varieties. I will update this article when and if I try other varieties.

Site and Soil Preparation

Choose a location that receives full sun for best gourd production, 6-8 hours of direct sun is best. If your soil doesn't drain too well, consider raised beds to improve drainage. My raised beds are only 6" tall. Of course, if you are growing many gourds, raised beds would not be cost effective. Gourds do like water and are fairly shallow rooted, but the stems and roots can rot if kept constantly wet.

Nothing is more important to growing healthy plants than properly preparing the soil, whether you are talking about gourds, edibles, or flowering plants. If you can prepare the soil in the fall for the spring planting season, that would be best. All I do is shred up fallen leaves in the fall and pile them on the gourd beds. Then I put down a 1-2" layer of compost and/or composted manure; whatever I happen to have at the time. This will keep the leaves from blowing away and help the leaves to decompose faster. If I had a weed problem the year before, I also put a thin layer of black and white newspaper down before adding the layer of leaves. 2-3 layers would be fine for this, as you want it to decompose by spring. This will block any light needed for weed seeds to germinate and also enrich the soil. At this point, I like to hose down the bed, just to get everything settled, but it's not necessary, especially since it is usually rainy in the fall, but if you are experiencing extremely dry conditions, you may want to water it once a week so that the leaves compost properly.

Seed Starting

If you have a long growing season, you can start your seeds outside after all threat of frost is over, but if you live in zone 6 or colder, you will have to start your seeds indoors or in a greenhouse. It's easy, fun to do, and you don't have to worry about some of the seeds not germinating and scrambling to plant more.

It's best to start the seeds 6-8 weeks before you plan on setting them out in the garden. Make sure you have a lot of room for them to grow inside, because once they get started they can grow like weeds, but you can control them somewhat by pinching out the growing tips.

To begin, you need to nick the corner of your seeds with a pair of nail clippers or a sharp knife. They have hard shells and making a tiny cut will allow them to soak up water. Soak your seeds overnight in a cup of warm water. I've found that if you put a paper towel in the cup, it helps to keep the seeds submerged so that they can absorb the water. Check them the next morning and see if they have all sunk to the bottom of the cup. If they float, they need to soak longer. Add more warm water and soak them again overnight. If they still float, they are probably not mature seeds and won't sprout anyway, so throw them out and try some new ones.

I've found it's best to start gourd seeds in a container that is covered, which helps to retain moisture and in a warm area, away from direct sun light. The top of a refrigerator works great for this, or you can buy special warming mats that sit under the seed starting trays. Gourd seeds can take anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks to germinate. If conditions are perfect, I've had gourds germinate in three days.

I like to use a potting mix specifically for seed starting. Most gourd seeds need to be 1" below the soil surface, but check with your package instructions in case your variety is different. Sprinkle the containers with a little water, and cover with some sort of clear plastic to form a little mini greenhouse. Check them everyday to make sure the soil is still moist. Once they have sprouted, remove the plastic and sit them under a grow light. The closer the light is to your gourds, the stockier the plant will be. My lights are only an inch or two above the plants and the lights get moved as the plants grow.

The first set of leaves will be smooth and oval in shape and will not resemble a gourd leaf at all. Once they have grown their first set of true leaves (the ones that resemble a gourd leaf), it's safe to give them a little fertilizer. I use an organic fertilizer that encourages root development at half strength. It has a 4-15-12 ratio of Nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, but any kind with a similar ratio will do fine. Once you begin to see the roots growing out the pot, it's time to pot them up to a bigger size. If you started out with small cell packs, a 4" pot, or quart size pot is fine. In this pot, I like to mix a sterile potting mix with half compost and mix in some worm castings and a slow release granular fertilizer. If they should outgrow this pot before they get set out in the spring, you can pot them up even bigger, but you shouldn't have to. If this is a problem, consider starting them later next year.

To encourage bushier plants with strong roots and to keep the gourds in check while you are growing them inside, you may want to pinch off the growing tips. I usually wait until I start to see the long tendrils growing. I don't know the technical term, but they wrap themselves around trellises or anything else they can, so that they can grow upward. They are very thin and no leaves will be growing from them. Just pinch them off, going back to the first set of leaves. This way, they won't get all tangled up in themselves. You aren't going to hurt the gourds, so don't be afraid to pinch them back.

Hardening Off

Hardening off your plants is extremely important and if you don't do it right, you can ruin all your hard work. About a week before your last frost date, you can begin hardening the plants off. Daytime temperatures should be consistently in the 50s at this point. On the first day, water the plants and then sit them in the sun for 20 minutes, bring them back inside. On the second day increase the time in the sun to 30 minutes. On the third day, increase the time to 1 hour and then double the time outdoors each day until they can stay in the sun five hours without the leaves showing signs of wilting or scorch. Check the soil to make sure it's not too dry and move them into the shade if they look stressed.

I also believe it's important for the plants to get used to the cooler temperatures outside as well. If your nights are cool, but yet well above freezing (mid to upper 40s), I like to sit them outside for several hours in the evening so they can get used to being outside in the real world. This can be done during the same week as you are getting them used to the sunshine; just start later in the day and leave them outside after the sun has set for an hour or two each night.

If temperatures suddenly turn cool in the middle of your hardening off process, you can build a cold frame for them and they can stay in that once they have gotten used to the sun.

Transplanting to the Garden

Once the plants are totally hardened off they can be planted outdoors, providing all threat of frost is past. For our area, our last frost date is in the middle of May, but I usually like to wait until the last full moon in May before planting. We always seem to have a frost on the night of a full moon, when the weather is clear. Many times I don't get them in the ground until Memorial Day weekend, but they can stay in the cold frame until then.

Plant them at the same depth as they were in their pots. Large gourds should be set out at least 2" apart, but the ones I listed above, I have planted one foot apart with no problems. If you are worried that your soil does not have enough nutrients, you can scratch in a little 10-10-10 fertilizer before planting.

Large gourds should be allowed to grow along the ground, but smaller gourds like what I have listed are perfect to be grown on trellises, especially if you have a small space in which to grow them and need to grow up rather than out. Growing on a trellis also allows the gourds to be perfectly shaped rather than slightly flat on one side from sitting on the ground.

Watering

Gourds need a lot of water to grow, but yet they don't like to remain wet constantly. Gourds are shallow rooted so watering them 20 minutes a day is not too much. Try to water in the morning so that the leaves have time to dry off before evening. In September, watering should be cut back to three times a week and in October, supplemental watering can stop completely.

Fertilizing

The best thing you can do for your gourds, and most of your plants, is to use lots of compost. Putting a 1"-2" layer on the beds at least once a year is essential, although I think applying once in the Spring and once in the Fall is best. Organic matter attracts earthworms and beneficial microbes that keep a soil healthy. If you can do this, you really don't need much in the way of fertilizer, but you can scratch in some 10-10-10 fertilizer before planting time if you are worried about them not having enough nutrients. I prefer to use organic fertilizers, such as Plant Tone, Worm Castings, Fish Emulsion, Compost Tea or Alfalfa Tea. Be careful about applying too much Nitrogen based fertilizers because you'll have lots of gorgeous leaves and very little fruit.

Getting More Gourds from a Vine

I learned this trick from someone online a few years ago. To get more gourds you must cut off the end of the vine when it reaches 10-15 feet long. Gourds have male flowers that form on the main stem and female flowers that form on the side runner vines. The female flower is what is needed to produce the actual gourd. You can tell the female from the male because the female will have a little mini gourd attached to the flower, whereas the male does not have one. Cutting the end of the stem will force more side runner vines, which means more gourds. Once the main gourd vine reaches 10 feet long, cut off about 6 inches. This will increase gourd production by more than 50%. If your soil is good and there is adequate moisture, the vine should have no trouble supporting the extra gourds.

Pollinating

Gourds flower at night and are pollinated by moths. You can increase gourd production by helping nature along and pollinating the flowers yourself. If the female flower is not pollinated, it will shrivel

up and turn brown. If you notice this happening, start pollinating them yourself. It's easy and fun to do.

My gourd flowers are always open a couple of hours after sunrise, so I prefer to pollinate them in the morning, but they soon will close, so you have to get out there early, or pollinate after dark when the flowers first open.

To pollinate by hand check the vine first to make sure that you have some female flowers open and male flowers open, preferably from the same vine. Then, break off the male flower and remove the pedals and touch the center of the male flower to the center of the female flower. You have just transferred pollen from the male flower to the female flower. You can usually use a male flower multiple times.

If you use a male flower from a different variety as the female, this is called cross-pollination and the seeds from those gourds will be different than the parent plants. You can experiment and see what you will get.

If you want to harvest your own gourd seeds for growing next year, keep in mind if they were pollinated by the same variety or not. You can mark the gourds with a piece of yarn tied loosely to the stem to tell them apart.

Caring for Developing Gourds

Gourds are not affected by too many pests, but if you are trying to grow very large gourds, you may want to take a few extra precautions. Large gourds that are sitting directly on the ground are most susceptible. Placing a piece of white plastic under any gourd that sits on the ground, will protect it from rot and bugs that feed directly from the soil. This is also a good opportunity to sit the gourd up on its bottom, so it forms a pleasing shape. White or clear plastic is preferred as it will keep the soil cooler than black plastic.

If you are growing gourds on a trellis and they look like they might need a little extra support, you can make a sling to help support it using old pantyhose or burlap.

As the vine ages, you will notice the older leaves at the bottom of the vine will begin to yellow, turn brown and drop off. This is normal and as long as your gourds are continuing to grow and new leaves are forming along the rest of the vine, they are fine. This is more noticeable on gourds that are growing on a trellis.

Powdery mildew can be a problem with some varieties, I've noticed, but I usually don't worry about this either. It doesn't seem to affect the gourds, so I just leave them be. Sometimes doing nothing is better than trying to fix the problem as you can cause more problems by using chemicals.

Harvesting

Let your gourds grow until the vines are completely dead. This happens after your first killing frost. But don't pick the gourds yet, you want the stems to completely dry, which takes an additional 7-10 days. Once the stems are completely dry, all the way down to the gourd, you can cut them from the vine, leaving as much of the stem attached to the gourd as possible. Waiting to cut the gourds gets them ready for the curing process. Cutting them early can cause underdeveloped gourds to rot.

Curing

There are several ways to leave your gourds for curing and it largely depends on how many you have and how much space you have for curing. Also, don't expect 100% survival rate when curing. It is very common to lose 5%-10% of your gourds to rot.

I prefer to cure my gourds in my garden shed as they begin to form mold and mildew on them, which is normal for the curing process. You don't want that in your house, so store them away from the house, yet under cover, protected from rain and snow. You can spread them out on a counter to dry over the winter. Once you hear liquid sloshing around inside the gourds, you can drill a 1/16 size hole in the bottom of large gourds to speed along the curing process, but I haven't done that yet. The varieties I listed above are not all that big and can cure fine on their own.

If you are growing a large amount of gourds for a business, or have some very large prized gourds, you may want to have them in an area with a circulating fan to help prevent rot.

Gourds will go through some horrible looking stages before they are completely cured. This is perfectly normal and as long as none grow soft or begin to rot, don't worry about it. As the gourds begin to harden, you can peel away the flaking skin to get a smoother leather-like finish, or just let them cure on their own. The mold and mildew can create some beautiful patterns on the gourds.

Finishing

There are endless possibilities when it comes to finishing your gourds. To start with, you want to clean them in a solution of bleach water. One part bleach to ten parts water is sufficient. You can use a stiff bristled brush to help get off any remaining skin. Once they are clean, let them air dry for a day or two before beginning your project.

If you will be drilling into your gourds, make sure you wear a dust mask as the dust from inside the gourds is very irritating to the lungs. Any drill bit designed for wood will work fine on a gourd. Gourds can be painted with any kind of paint and stained with wood stains or leather stains. You can even make your own stains from nuts or tea. Gourds should be sealed with polyurethane when finished, especially if they will be used outside.

Good luck with your gourds and most importantly, have fun growing and working with them!