

# INSTRUCTIONS FOR RAISING GOURDS

*Lagenaria* (hard-shell) gourds require a long growing season and plenty of room to grow. They have large, luminous, night-blooming flowers and rampant growing vines. The blossoms produced are male and female. Fe-male blossoms produce the fruit (gourd) and the male blossom the pollen.

**PLANTING** — Seeds or plants (if started indoors) should be planted outside after all danger of frost is past, as they cannot withstand frost or damp cold ground, and must be protected. Planting time will vary in different areas of the country. Time can be gained by soaking the gourd seed 3 or 4 days before planting, as this speeds germination. Seeds should be planted in 5 inch pots, to avoid repotting, as plants resent being disturbed and will literally stand still for 2 to 3 weeks after being transplanted. Plants should be hardened off before putting outside and should not be kept indoors after the vines begin to grow or they will be weak and spindly.

Planting sites can be prepared by digging and filling holes with garden compost or well rotted manure. If planting seeds directly in the ground, plant about 8 seeds to a hill to allow for poor germination. Hills should be 6 feet apart and the depth of planting is about 2 times the length of the seed.

Fertilizer is not necessary and should not be added if the soil is high in nitrogen, although a low nitrogen fertilizer dissolved in water (1 cup to 2 gallons of water) may be added when the gourds begin to form. Never add fertilizer late in the season as it causes excessive vine growth and delays gourd maturity. Best to hand weed around young plants, as the roots run laterally and could be damaged with close cultivation.

Planting sites should be in full sun, preferably with a fence or trellis for the vines to climb. Gourds grown off the ground will be more uniform in size and color, and possibly escape insect blemishes. All insects which bother cucurbits (melons) will find gourds. They can be protected by spraying or by planting insect-repellant plants (marigolds, nasturtiums, radishes) nearby. Vines should be pruned when 8-foot long so that the vines will branch, making more space for gourds.

**POLLINATION** — Hardshells will cross pollinate, so if gourds true to a particular type are wanted, various kinds should be widely separated. Hand pollination can be practiced for a more abundant crop also. The female blossom opens and blooms for one night only, and if the job of pollination is left to night flying insects only, the quantity of gourds may be small. Hand pollination is done by transferring the pollen from male to female blossoms using your finger or a fine brush.

**HARVESTING AND CURING** — Because they require a long growing season, gourds should be left in the garden as

long as there is life left in the vine. Frost may discolor the gourds but will not harm them. Some growers think that leaving them out all winter improves them for craft work. They can be hung on a line or in a tree. If picking gourds, only take those with stems that have browned or shriveled. If the stem is green and healthy, the gourd can continue to grow until frost.

Cut the gourd from the vine, leaving at least 2 inches or more of stem. Wash the gourd with a solution of bleach or Lysol and water and dry it well. Gourds need 3 to 6 months to dry. The most important factor in curing gourds is time. They cannot be hurried. They should be hung in a well-ventilated, dry location. Often an exterior coat of mildew appears on the gourd. It is the natural drying process, does not harm the gourd, should be brushed off and later sanded with steel wool. If the gourd wrinkles or gets soft, it should be discarded. As long as they remain hard, they should be saved.

When completely dry, gourds will be light weight, a brown/tan color, mottled from mold, and the seeds will rattle (although the sound may be muffled). Once cured, clean the gourd by placing it in hot water a few minutes, then scraping off the outer film and skin. Cut a 2-inch hole in the side using a circular hole saw and remove all the guts by scraping with a long metal spoon. Drill seven 5/16" drainage holes in the bottom and a set in the neck for hanging. Paint the gourds with a white, oil base paint.

**GOURD GROWING BOOKLET** — The Purple Martin Conservation Association has a 12-page booklet titled: "*Growing & Preparing Gourd Homes for Martins*" available for purchase (see below). It contains 20 photos, a Purple Martin migration timing map, plus a diagram of how and where to place martin housing. It also has detailed information on starting seeds indoors; soil preparation; site choice; transplanting seedlings outdoors; planting seeds directly outdoors; using fences, trellises, and arbors; irrigation; fertilizers; cultivation; weeding and mulching; hand pollination; pruning the vines, fruits, and leaves; insect and disease control; harvesting; curing the gourds indoors or out, washing and scrubbing cured gourds; drilling and gutting gourds; saving and storing gourd seeds; preserving and painting gourds; hanging gourds for martins, proper care of gourds, removing nests from gourds, and using gourds for other bird species.

To order this highly-detailed booklet, request a catalog by writing to the Purple Martin Conservation Association, Edinboro University of PA, Edinboro, PA, 16444. This booklet can be purchased online at <http://purplemartin.org/shop/GHouses1.html> No person serious about growing gourds should be without this information!