

Grow Gourds for Fun Projects

By Susan Camp

Jim and I were reminiscing last week about old friends we haven't seen for years. One couple lived on his grandmother's lovely old farm in Piedmont North Carolina. Phyllis had the proverbial green thumb; she could throw some seeds on the ground, and they would sprout into something beautiful or unique.

Near the farmhouse, Phyllis maintained a huge old scuppernong arbor with gnarled, ropy vines. Each spring, Phyllis planted gourd seeds that would soon grow into leafy vines that twined and twirled around the arbor wires. By high summer, large bottle gourds of varying sizes and shapes hung from the vines like lanterns in a Marrakech bazaar. Phyllis was an artist and fashioned rattles and drums decorated with feathers and beads from the dried gourds.

The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), also called birdhouse gourd, like squash, pumpkin, zucchini, melon, and cucumber is a member of the Cucurbitae family. The bottle gourd probably originated in Africa, but gourd remains also have been found in Mexico and Peru dating back to 7500 to 10,000 BC.

L. siceraria seeds sprout easily in one to two weeks when planted in slightly acidic, fertile, well-drained soil in full sun after the soil temperature has reached 70°F. You can let the vines grow along the ground or train them to an arbor or trellis. They will reach 10 to 16 feet in length, and can be pruned at around 10 feet to encourage branching. The white, trumpet-shaped flowers open at night.

The gourds may vary in size and shape. Most bottle gourds have a long neck and a rounded base. Some have a "nipped waist," then flare out at the bottom. Color may vary, too, from green to white, brown, or mottled green and white.

Gourds mature in about 90 to 95 days when the smooth, green rind hardens and turns white or begins to turn brown. You can cut small ones then; leave a piece of stem attached to the gourd. Larger gourds should be left on the vine until the first frost.

Gourds must cure for several weeks to several months in a warm, dry place with good air circulation. You will know the gourd is cured when the seeds inside rattle when the gourd is shaken. Wash cured gourds in a household bleach solution and let them dry. You can then saw, sand, paint, or decorate the gourds. A light coat of wax protects the surface.

Besides drums and rattles, bottle gourds have been used for centuries to create ladles, dippers, and bowls. Make birdhouses from small gourds and hang them in your garden to attract insect-eating purple martins. Paint a face on a large gourd to serve as a Halloween jack-o'-lantern. The trick-or-treaters will love it!

See University of New Hampshire Extension article “How to Grow Gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*)” for basic planting information. University of Florida Extension Gardening Solutions article “*Lagenaria* (Bottle) Gourds” and University of Missouri Extension article “The Gourd Life Begins with This Grow-Your-Own Utensil” cover curing and cleaning mature gourds.

Correction to March 7, 2024 “Gardening Corner”

Occasionally, a sentence will lose meaning in the transition from laptop to print. If you were confused by a statement in last week’s column, here is the corrected paragraph:

You might be surprised to learn that there are distinct differences between the three terms, and those differences mainly have to do with the point of origin of the sharp protrusions. Prickles arise from the epidermis or bark, i.e. the outer layer of a plant. They can be easily peeled or popped from the stem. Spines, on the other hand, grow from the deeper layer below the epidermis, and are considered modified leaves or stipules, the small structures that grow on either side of the petiole, or leaf stalk. Thorns are woody projections, actually modified branches. Keep in mind, however, that none of these definitions are graven in stone, and botanists and gardening writers will vary in their usage of these terms.