



Green Cleaning a Gourd

Not Just For Manipulated Gourds!

A light-colored gourd with no mottling is a beautiful surface that gourd artists love to work on. Wood burning on a uniform, light-colored surface is ideal. Applying ink dyes on a uniform surface yields a consistent color. Jim Story challenged growers of manipulated gourds to green clean them for “extra credit” during judging. So, how do you get your gourd to look like this? It is a process called Green Cleaning.



On the left is a green gourd; On the right is a freshly green-cleaned gourd



Two green-cleaned, manipulated gourds that have dried

The simple explanation is that Green Cleaning means removing the outer skin from a gourd while it is still green, or at least while it still has some green skin remaining. By removing the green skin, fungi growing on the outer skin is reduced and thus mottling on the shell caused by them as the gourd dries is also reduced or eliminated. Some gourds will turn out to be a beautiful blond, others are a light brown or bronze.

What You Should Know

Timing.

1. The gourd should be fully mature, having remained on the vine until the plant stem has turned brown for several inches from the gourd toward the plant's crown.
2. Following harvest, let the gourd rest for several days so the fluids settle deep into the wall of the gourd and lessen leakage. You will notice the gourd weighs less than it did when you harvested it.

How To.



Starting at the bottom, scraping with a small sharp knife

3. A small knife (not too sharp) is good for scraping the skin, while narrow cords (guitar string or piano wire, dental picks) are helpful at getting into crevices and tight spots. A dull pocket knife or kitchen knife are often chosen. Do not use a potato-peeler or serrated knife.
4. Use a whittling, back and forth motion to lightly scrape only the green skin (no digging).
5. Start small and in an inconspicuous place, like the bottom of the gourd. Scrape a small spot and wait a couple of minutes to see if it “weeps.” Weeping is the oozing of moisture from the shell where the skin was scraped off. If it weeps, STOP! Set it aside for a few days and let it rest more. If the gourd doesn't weep at first, continue to watch as you scrape as it may start to weep in another area. If you don't notice weeping until after you've cleaned a significant portion of the gourd, finish scraping the gourd and then place it in a loose plastic bag for a few days. Be sure to take the gourd out of the bag daily and remove accumulated moisture to prevent it from rotting. This reduces the speed of evaporation and may prevent the cracking--or it may not.
6. Once scraped the drying process is sped-up. After scraping has started it is a good idea to finish scraping the entire gourd. If a gourd is scraped off all the way around in one large section (such as the bottom half, but not the top half) it will likely crack due to the stress of one section drying faster and shrinking.



In this case the gourd would probably break into 3 pieces right along the top and bottom edge of the scraped portion.

7. Scrub lightly with a green fabric pot scrubber to remove membrane residue (scrape lines) that are often left when green cleaned with a knife.
8. If you live in a dry climate, place the green-cleaned gourd in a dry area out of direct sun while it dries,

Contributed by the AGS Jim Story Committee

The Role of Humidity

Green cleaning an identical gourd in the desert and in a humid location will not get the same results in most cases. Betty Finch used to live and grow gourds in California, but since she moved to Tennessee, she has noticed an important difference that you, too, should know about.

“It is extremely difficult to green clean a gourd in a humid climate and get perfect light-colored, blemish-free results. I have not been as successful in Tennessee as I was in California. It seems gourds here dry very slowly; even green-cleaned gourds dry slowly and turn a darker color. Perhaps my results turned dark because I kept them in a fairly dark room. This year I will try keeping a green-cleaned gourd indoors, in indirect sunlight near a window on a rack where it would get good circulation to discourage mold. In a dry desert climate as long as the skin is green and blemish-free and you place the green-cleaned gourd in a well-circulated area it will dry within days with a uniform light color.”

but where it still has daylight. In total darkness a green-cleaned gourd will mold.

If you live in a humid climate place the green-cleaned gourd indoors in indirect sunlight (near a window) on a rack to dry faster and possibly get a lighter color on the skin.

9. Rotate the gourd often and be sure there is good air circulation because it will dry faster and uneven drying could cause a problem.
10. Good air circulation can be helpful and some folks place a fan in the room or garage where the gourd may be set to finish drying.
11. Wipe periodically (1-2 times a day) with a Clorox wipe or paper towel damp with a dilute bleach solution as it dries and rotate frequently to encourage even drying.
12. If a few tiny dots of brown have appeared on the skin you must clean immediately to remain stain free.
13. In most cases the gourd will be dried out with a beautiful complexion in about 2-3 weeks. Once scraped the dark staining of the gourd will stop if kept in a well-circulated area with some indirect light (in dry climates).
14. When stem is dried, scrape off the brown outer skin, then use a wire brush to remove any dirt and debris.

Risks



Shriveled and cracked gourds that dried too quickly or were immature when green cleaned

1. If your gourd is harvested too early, the gourd will probably dry too fast, shrivel and/or crack.
2. If your gourd has dried too much before you start scraping your risk for mottling from fungi is much greater because it is already growing on the skin.
3. The lining of a green gourd (wall and fibrous tissue) is sometimes very strong and it is believed that the drying lining is pulling on the gourd shell and is what causes cracks.
4. If you only scrape half of the gourd (especially a tall body gourd) it is very likely to break as it dries.
5. Every grower who has green-cleaned gourds has experienced a few failures. But, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again! And gourd luck!

From Betty Finch: I once green cleaned only the top half a thin canteen-shaped gourd and left the skin on the bottom half. The gourd cracked right along the edge of the scraped area creating gaps that made the gourd look like a flying saucer with perfectly lined up windows all the way around.

Partial Green Cleaning. Betty Finch has successfully green-cleaned an area that will be used as a blank canvas to wood burn on later, e.g., a circle, square or rectangular frame-like area. This was done when she lived in a dry climate, but might not work as well in areas with high humidity. In dry situations it will stay evenly light colored without mold stain for nice contrast and details to show up. This is especially nice for people who wood burn with a light touch/shade. Another variation Betty has done is started by lightly marking a decorative pattern in the skin using leather working tools and then scraping/green cleaning the center (an area that is about one-third of the gourd). She has never had a problem with cracking when scraping a spot of this size on the side of a gourd for future woodburning.



Examples of light areas from partially green clean areas that were later wood burned

A final suggestion, from Cecile Garrison: Get a copy of the Jim Story video where he demonstrates green cleaning. When you see it, you will see it can be easy to do. I strongly recommend the video to anyone who plans to enter the Jim Story competition. Get your own copy by going to www.indianagourdsociety.org/waysmeans.htm 