GROWING AND HARVESTING GOURDS

By GLENN BURKHALTER, Past President, Alabama Gourd Society

SOIL& SHADE: Gourds will grow in many types of soil and with varying amounts of sun, but the preferred conditions are well drained, slightly acid soil and full sun.

SOIL PREPARATION: Like most desirable plants, gourds prefer a soil free of weeds and grasses. Again, they can grow under difficult conditions, but competition for moisture and nutrients may cause them to be smaller and less in number. Prepare the soil as you would any other vegetable in your garden.

FERTILITY: A soil test will determine Ph and fertilizer recommendations. Soil test boxes can be obtained from your local Farm Service Agency and recommendations for amending the soil should be included with their analysis. If you want to test the soil yourself, a test kit should be available at a local garden supply store or from a seed catalogue.

In the absence of a soil test, a liberal application of a balanced fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, should get your plants off to a good start. Make a second application of fertilizer when the gourd vines begin to run. For the organic gardener, animal manure and composted mulch may be sufficient.

SPACE: If not pruned, some gourd vines can grow to a length of 150 feet, so it's difficult to contain the vines in a limited amount of space. Keep this in mind when selecting a spot for growing your gourds.

PLANTING: Plant gourds about the same time as other warm season vegetables. In colder climates, starting plants indoors and transplanting when soil temperatures reach 65 degrees may be your best option. Soak the seeds in water overnight prior to planting.

Gourds are in the same family as watermelons and pumpkins, so seeds are planted in hills spaced eight to 10 feet apart. They can be planted closer than that, but the vines grow so long and spread out so much that closer spacing is unnecessary and the dense foliage can increase the possibility of diseases.

I plant several seeds in a hill and thin back to two or three plants per hill once they have become well established. Seldom will you get 100% germination and you never know what pest problem may arise to reduce the number of plants that do sprout.

GERMINATION: In moist fertile soil that has warmed to 65 degrees Fahrenheit, gourd seeds may germinate in five to seven days. However, do not get too concerned if it takes a couple of weeks before you see the seedlings emerge. I have seen seedlings emerge as long as four to five weeks after planting.

CULTIVATION: Gourd roots spread out much like their vines, so it's best not to cultivate once the vines begin to run. At that point, weed and grass control requires hoeing or limited applications of specific herbicides. Use extreme caution when applying herbicides, and follow the manufacturers use recommendations.

PEST CONTROL: Gourds are subject to attack by a number of insects, animals and diseases.

Probably the first pests to watch for are the Cucumber beetles. A heavy infestation of these insects can devour the gourd seedlings overnight when they first start to emerge from the soil. Corn earworms, aphids and stinkbugs are other common pests. Your Farm Service Agency can recommend effective control measures.

Animal pests can be a problem. Squirrels, mice and chipmunks will cut into dry gourds to get the seeds. Deer will eat the vines and take an occasional bite out of a green gourd, and if there are very many deer,

they will keep the vines chewed back so much that they cannot bloom and set fruit. Groundhogs will eat the vines also, and a mature adult can consume as much as 14 pounds of foliage per day!

With their large leaves and thick foliage, certain plant diseases can cause severe damage to gourds, especially during cool wet weather. Again, your Farm Service Agency can assist you with disease identification and control recommendations. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to maintain disease control. Probably the easiest thing for you to do is to space out your plants to allow as much air movement as possible among the vines. When possible, providing a trellis or arbor to get the vines up off the ground will help also.

POLLINATION: Gourd vines produce both male and female blossoms and pollen must be transferred from the male to the female in order for a fruit to set. This is done by a number of different insects. The female blossoms can be found on the end of a small gourd (pepo or ovary) at the time of blooming. However, if the female is not pollinated, the young gourd will turn dark and drop off. Male blossoms are on the end of a long stem and no gourd is present. Use extreme caution in applying insecticides to the gourd plants after blooming begins unless you intend to do hand pollination. Insecticides do not discriminate between the good and the bad bugs.

MOISTURE: Gourds are resilient plants but may need watering under very dry conditions. In a backyard garden, you may want to water thoroughly once or twice a week during **morning** hours so the plants can dry before nightfall. In sandy or very porous soils, daily watering may be necessary until the plants develop a good root system. In field situations, watering is difficult unless you have an irrigation system. This can be rather expensive and is usually not an option for the novice gourd grower.

HARVESTING: Depending on the species of gourds planted, they can require from 90 to 180 days to mature. The small, colorful ornamentals require the least amount of time, and the huge bushel basket gourds require the most. Therefore, make sure the gourds are mature before you harvest them. This may be difficult to determine and where milder winter temperatures permit, it's best to just let the gourds stay on the vine until they are completely dry. However, prolonged extreme freezing conditions, as might be experienced in northern climates, could damage the gourds if left outside to dry. Consider contacting an experienced grower in your area for more specific advice on potential freeze damage.

USES: Gourds date back to prehistoric times and have been used in many different ways. Storage vessels for water, grains and other household items were certainly among the early uses. When the pioneers arrived in the "new world", they found the American Indians were using gourds to attract Purple Martins to their campgrounds for insect control. Even today, some of our "old timers" can remember using a gourd dipper to drink water from a spring or water bucket on the back porch.

In modern times, gourds are converted into fine art and used for decoration in some of the most expensive homes. Many state chapters of the AGS have annual gourd Festivals where unbelievable gourd art is displayed.

EPILOGUE: Growing gourds can be an interesting and rewarding experience. Since the different varieties cross pollinate easily, it's always exciting to see what your new "babies" are going to look like. Try it! You'll like it!