

Green Cleaning a Gourd

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Jim Story was the acknowledged master at gourd manipulation, and many of his creations were green cleaned. While Jim did offer some basic instruction, much of what I have learned was by trial and error, and that's a very painful and expensive way to do it. Tips and procedures outlined in this article should help avoid some of those heartaches.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the term, "green cleaning", it simply means removing the outer skin from a gourd while it is still green, or at least while it still has some green color remaining.

I acknowledge that my experience has been in the southeast where summer heat and humidity is a daily occurrence and you may not experience the same conditions. But you might get some benefit from my experience.

So, how do you do it? Most people use a dull pocket or kitchen knife and just start scraping. You may find a whittling motion is best for you. I use a knife too, but I also use the side of a fine wire wheel brush mounted on a bench grinder. Be sure to use a face shield if you do this. A wire bristle CAN and WILL fly off the wheel and you certainly don't want one in your eye.

But why would you want to green clean? Well, if done at the right time, a green cleaned gourd should come out with very little mottling on the shell caused by fungi growing on the outer skin as the gourd dries. Some gourds will turn out to be a beautiful blond, brown or bronze, and many will be uniform in color.

I mentioned green cleaning the gourd at the right time; and herein lies the problem. If you do it too early, the gourd will dry too fast, shrivel and crack. Wait too late and there will be a lot of mottling from fungi already growing on the skin.

So when is the right time? I surely wish I knew! I did ask Jim that question once, and the only hint I remember from him was; "if it bleeds, stop"!

I have now green cleaned several hundred gourds and always have a few "failures". But here are some clues that I use to try to determine if a gourd is ready to green clean: (and here I'm assuming that you are selecting a gourd from a gourd farm, not a green gourd "off a shelf"). That's never a good idea whether you green clean or not, unless you plan to use it as a green decoration and don't care if it doesn't dry out properly.

- The stem should be dead (brown) and not showing any green. A green stem indicates that the gourd is still receiving nourishment from the vine.
- Because of some drying, the gourd should be lighter in weight than gourds of a similar size that still have green stems. This is an indication that the gourd has lost some of its interior fluid.

- Once you've selected the "right" gourd, scrape a small spot and wait a couple of minutes to see if it "bleeds". Bleeding is the oozing of moisture from the shell where the skin was scraped off. If it is bleeding, STOP! Set it aside for a few days and let it dry more. If the gourd doesn't bleed at first, continue to watch as you scrape as it may start to bleed in another area. Same advice, if it bleeds, STOP!
- White scrape marks on the shell where you have scraped are another indication that the gourd is not ready for green cleaning. This means that the gourd is not dry enough to clean, or the shell is so thin that it probably won't be worth the effort anyway.
- If the shell is showing a lot of greenish tinge where you've scraped, that's another indication that you should let it dry a couple more days before finishing. A slight greenish tinge is probably OK.
- If you first notice bleeding after you've cleaned a significant portion of the gourd, place it loosely in a plastic bag for a few days. This reduces the speed of evaporation and may prevent the cracking--or it may not.
- Once you've completed the green cleaning, place the gourd in a shaded, airy location. There is still moisture in the gourd that will diffuse out through the shell, and fungi will still try to grow. Good air circulation will help reduce that growth but periodic wiping with a 50-50 mixture of Clorox and water may be necessary to help control the fungi.
- Finally, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again! And gourd luck!

Green Cleaning Tips I Learned from Jim Story

By Jim Ballard, Chairman Jim Story Committee

1. Use a sharp knife for scraping off the skin with a scraping motion like peeling a carrot (or a back and forth motion).
2. Do not dig in to the gourd with your tools.
3. In the areas where ropes or panty hose are used for the training process a sharp pointed pic or a dental type pick are useful tools for green cleaning.
4. I also use a fine wire like a guitar string or piano wire for real tight spots.
5. A wire-toothed brush can also be used to remove the little bits of skin left behind.
6. Upon removing all of the skin from the gourd I take a scotch brite pad or copper/stainless steel dish scrubber and rub the gourd all over, then let the drying process begin.
7. Be sure the gourd is in an dry area that has daylight. In total darkness the green cleaned gourd will mold.
8. In most cases the gourd will be dried out with a beautiful completion in about 2-3 weeks.
9. Last be sure the gourd has a neat and clean stem (if it has a stem!) Jim taught me to remove any part of the vine from the end of the stem and to cut it at an angle or straight to make it nice looking stem (not crushed or ragged).

10. When stem is dried, scrape off the brown outer skin then use the wire brush to remove any dirt and debris.
11. After this process the gourd is all dry your gourd is ready to show.

Mastering Green Cleaning

By Cecile Garrison, Past President AGS

I want to elaborate on my experience with green cleaning a gourd. I have had good luck and I have had bad luck with this procedure. Green cleaning means removing the outer skin from a gourd while it is still green. I love the smooth and light color finish of a green cleaned gourd!

A Few Observations:

1. Most blemishes caused by insects or fungi are easily removed.
2. The gourd dries much faster so watch out!
3. Make that first scrape on the bottom of the gourd. If any moisture or "weeping" occurs, do not go any further. I read somewhere that one should wait forty-five days from harvest before green cleaning. Of course, you should not harvest the gourd until the stem is brown from the gourd to the ground!
4. I use a "paring" knife. You certainly do not want to use a serrated knife because it will scratch the inner skin. I experimented with a potato peeler-not a good idea either.
5. I got a copy of the Jim Story video where he demonstrated green cleaning. He makes it look easy. I recommend the video to anyone who plans to enter the Jim Story competition. Get your own copy by contacting the treasurer@indianagourdsociety.org-

