

Jim Story Award Committee

What About Manipulating Snake Gourds?

For many gourd growers, the “go to” variety for manipulation is the extra-long handled dipper gourd. Their characteristics – long, thin and relaxed when very young – make them ideal for contorting. A knot (or two, or even three) in the XL-handled dippers is frequently attempted. Other forms of manipulation of the long-handled dippers includes bending, restricting with ropes and constraining them in a container.



Left: Snake gourds grow fast and this one is being pulled in a couple of directions to complete the knot (black ties both gently pull and secure the gourd to the wire of the arbor)

Right: Now the knotted snake is retied and supported on the arbor

The question we are attempting to answer is how much of these same forms of manipulating can be done with a Snake gourd. The “pure” snake gourd is a long, thicker cylinder gourd that grows quickly from a skinny pencil to a fatter, long cylinder and is much less flexible early in the growing cycle which makes knots in the length problematic.

Betty Finch (Tennessee) tells us that, in her experience pure snake gourds, especially the large ones, over 6 feet in length, will not tolerate being manipulated. Even well-set (pure) snake gourds will drop from the vine if wrapped tightly or a mold is placed on them. “Every snake I tried to tie in a knot stopped growing, slowly died and withered on the vine.”

Glenn Burkhalter (Alabama) has had much success making knots in XL-handled dippers and found snake gourds to be much more challenging



when it comes to making knots. Of the many he tried, only two were successful. Another gourd and pumpkin grower in northern California, Leonardo Urena, had one successful knot in a snake gourd that we know of. Leonardo is a well-known, award winning giant pumpkin grower at the Hudson Winery in northern CA.

So why are we telling you this if it’s so hard and the failure rate is so high? Because it’s time to stop thinking that knots in gourds is “the” definition of a manipulated gourd. There are many other forms of manipulation. As we said with long dipper gourds, there are other forms of manipulation. Snake gourds can be successfully manipulated by bending, restricting with ropes and sometimes even constraining them in a container.

Another factor to consider is one we all know — gourds are easily cross-pollinated. Some snake gourds may be shorter or intentionally crossed with another variety to achieve some



When it was done growing and the vine was certainly dried, they were cleaned by Carla's good friend Steve Kiser. ~Two manipulated snake gourd wreaths

characteristics that make it possible to tolerate being manipulated. That may explain why Betty and other gourd growers have had some success manipulating some snake gourds using bending and certain forms of constriction.

Betty will loosely wrap snake gourds and let them grow into the wrap. She has been able to create bends on snakes where she wanted them by slipping a 4-inch section of a cotton tube sock over the gourd while it is young and the sock is very loose. A cord attached to the sock can be used to pull the gourd in a specific direction as it grows. Adjustments can be made as necessary by slipping the sock higher or lower on the gourd to make the bend come out where she wants it. This is the method Betty used to bend the front legs of the galloping horse sculpture.

Most of Betty Finch's sculptures are a cross between a snake and a birdhouse which gives them one fatter rounded end. The legs on Betty's ballerina on top of the horse are good examples of her "Shapely Leg" snake gourds. She has saved the best genetics for that trait for 20 years and plants a few each year. Some seeds do revert back to pointier end snakes, but this is likely because of the genetics in the cross-pollination. She believes her best ones are $\frac{3}{4}$ snake and $\frac{1}{4}$ birdhouse.

Carla Arnold (Idaho) has successfully manipulated a (shorter) snake gourd into a wreath shape, which was

no small feat. Two techniques were applied. The faux braid appearance was achieved when a cotton cord was crisscrossed around the young snake gourd. As it swelled to a normal circumference the cord constricted it, making the imprint of the faux braid. Forming it into a perfect wreath shape was the result of gradually pulling the cotton cord from both ends toward each other. The gourd was supported by a strip cut from a bed sheet, which prevented it from being elongated or worse-yet, having too much strain on the plant and breaking off.

Call to Action: Why not plant some snake gourd seeds near an arbor or trellis and then bind them with a cord like Glenn and Carla did...or slip a section of a tube sock over it and tug it to create a new shape like Betty did? I had a thought; could you make one that looked like a hockey-stick...or what about a triangle or a picture frame with 4 corners? Use your imagination and play with manipulating a snake gourd. 🧑🏻‍🌾



Carla Arnold's 1st step was to start when the snake gourd was thin and flexible (on a warm day in the humidity of the morning)



Carla's 2nd step was to wrap a cotton cord in a crisscross fashion around the gourd and start the bending process of bringing the ends toward each other



Carla's 3rd step was to support the gourd as it was growing and maturing. She tore strips from a bed sheet so it was wide and did not interfere with the cotton cord but provided wide support of the gourd holding it to the arbor as it continued to grow and preventing elongation

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AGS Members' Meeting Announcement

Mark your calendars and save the date for the 2022 AGS Members' Meeting. This year's meeting will be held in conjunction with the 2022 PA Gourd Fest on Friday, June 17, 2022 at 5:30 PM. AGS Members will be able to join the meeting in person or via the AGS Facebook page. AGS will utilize both the Facebook Live platform and Zoom to bring the meeting to the comforts of your home if you are unable to visit and attend the 2022 PA Gourd Fest.

The meeting will provide all AGS members with a quick review of the work the AGS Board has been focused on completing in 2022 such as the recent audit and update of the AGS By-laws needing to be voted on by the AGS Membership. In-person and online attendees will have the privilege of being entertained by guest presenters Betty Finch and Graham Ottoson as they discuss ways to invoke your creative thinking process, as well as be eligible for several drawings for free AGS Membership Renewals.

Additional information on how to attend online will be provided on the AGS website. We look forward to seeing you at the 2022 AGS Membership Meeting on Friday, June 17, 2022.



Left and previous page: Glenn Burkhalter has successfully constrained many snake gourds

Above: Leonardo Urena's knotted snake gourd