

## **Drying And Harvesting Gourds**

*By John Sturgeon*

Date: Unknown

Ornamental, soft-shelled gourds are ready to harvest when the tendril next to the gourd turns brown or the stems are dry and brown. Ornamentals are often picked prior to being fully mature and used for fall displays. If harvested early and not mature, these soft-shelled gourds may develop wrinkled skins and rot. When the gourds rattle [dry], you can paint or polish them with products used for finishing wood. Ornamental make excellent holiday ornaments or add interest to wreaths.

Hard-shell gourds require 110 to 150 days of warm weather to fully mature. They should be left on the vine as long as there is life in the vine. They must be cured. Since gourds are over 90% water, it may take several months for a large gourd to dehydrate. I wait till after hard frost in central Indiana to harvest my hard-shells.

Freezing temperatures do not hurt mature gourds. If the gourds wrinkle up, this indicates an immature gourd. One can leave gourds outside to dry or use an attic or garage. The outer skin will mold, rot, and began to peel as the gourd dries. **DO NOT THROW AWAY THE MOLDY GOURD.** After the fruit [gourd] has dried, scrape off the outer skin remaining to reveal the hard permanent shell below the grime. Soak dried gourds in water for a few minutes and wash/scrape. Use of a plastic scrubbing pad works for removing most of the mold. The mold patches may have discolored the shell but this can be painted over or use a clear finish to Enhance the appearance. Remember any wood finishing product can be used on a dried gourd.

## Harvest Complete? Now What?

By *Sid Meyers*

Date: Unknown

Many growers can tell you that the best crop you will ever grow is likely to be the last crop you grow before you decide what you want to do with your gourds. That results in the often heard question, "What do I do with all these gourds?"

The first thing you must do is to provide adequate storage to allow for good dry down of the harvest. Perhaps the easiest and most widely used method is to store your crop on wood skids, raised off the ground, sitting outside. Air circulation is very important to the drying process. The changes we experience in our winter weather also help the process, as well as starting the cleaning process. If possible, the drying area should be set up in a fenced, or otherwise contained area. The reason for this, is that as your gourds dry, they will become much lighter. Which means strong Spring winds can leave gourds scattered across your yard. Installing some type of simple side on your wooden skids can reduce this problem. You also must take into consideration how much snow might accumulate under your skids. Depending on where you live, drifting or snow fence effect could influence where you place your drying station.

Once your gourds have all been placed in your drying station, you can forget about them until winter looses its grip. However, you will receive a better dry down if you continue to monitor your gourds thru the winter months. Rotating, or turning your gourds once a month, along with removing any shriveled, or collapsed gourds will maximize the benefits of your drying station.

If your crop included more than one variety of gourd, they may dry down at different speeds. It stands to reason that a Mini-Nigerian will dry much quicker than a Nigerian Wine Bottle. To a degree different varieties require different tactics. While the Mini-Nigerian dries down easily, it is also easily lost if the wind catches it. While the Wine Bottle will almost demand regular turning to achieve a successful dry down. Some varieties, such as the apple, just dry very slowly. The Apple is relatively small in size, but is one of the slowest to dry.

Despite all of the variables, drying your crop is not a particularly difficult task. Good advice is to seek out an experienced grower if you have any questions.

Here are a few suggestions. Some, you may not have thought about. You can place an advertisement in your state's gourd society newsletter, or even the AGS publication, "The Gourd". The possible need to ship gourds may be a draw back to this method. A more regional solution might be your local newspaper.

Another option could be your local library. Many libraries have youth programs with directors who could utilize gourds in their programs. Along these same lines, art teachers and art departments have budgets to spend on supplies. Contacting, and education local art teachers could lead to nice sales. Both of these options could lead to additional sales over the original project makes it home. Yet another option, along these lines would be senior or assisted living centers. They also often have group art activities.

A source of possible sales that seems to be growing is "farmers markets" and auctions. Sales prices may be lower or even out of your control, but it allows you to move a large volume of gourds quickly. Some

growers choose to sell green, or current season gourds, thru this route. You must be very careful if you choose to utilize this route. At the very least, you should include information on proper drying procedures. Even experienced growers don't have 100% successful dry downs. So public relations damage to yourself as a grower and fellow gourders, could be difficult to overcome.

The easiest method if your location allows, may be to place a sign in your yard. This may require some educating of the general public in your home area. Over time this method can develop a loyal client base.

The most successful method may be a combination of two or more of the above options. The important thing is to ask questions and have fun with your gourds.

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## **Gourd Harvest Time**

*By Ron Bair*

Date: Unknown

A question asked by many, - "When do I pick my gourds?" While many of us are anxious to harvest our gourds, quite a few folks have already started, namely with the ornamentals, and some of the smaller hardshells.

A good rule of thumb to consider when picking all gourds is - To make sure they are mature! A mature gourd will be firm and solid, yet with a somewhat hollow sound when "thumped". When squeezing them with pretty good pressure, very little, if any, depression or indentation should be felt. Don't be mistaken, a mature gourd can be squashed with too much pressure! Gourds should be considered mature by length of 'required' growing season also. Some ornamentals will mature in 90 days or less, while some of the larger hardshells need 120 to possibly 150 days to mature. Typically, you can think for the most part, the larger the gourd, the longer the growing season required. The smaller hardshells, and possibly a few of the medium size hardshell gourds, will mature in 90 to 105 days within the right growing conditions. This will also depend on the gourds' origination. Did it come from the Southwest, or the Northeast, or Overseas?

When actually picking your gourds the stems left on the gourd usually works best. Stems tend to make them a better 'keeper'. Plus, it adds a little character. Try to cut the stem from the vine with a sharp cutter. An 'anvil pruner' works very good to make a quick clean cut. About half the distance between the vine and the gourd, is usually a good medium place to cut. Chances are, if the stem 'bleeds' after it has been cut, possibly it's not fully mature. Some of these will still mature, while others won't. If a gourd shrivels and rots, more than likely, it was not mature when picked.

The gourds nearest the start of the plant are usually the first to mature. The colors will change as it becomes mature. The ornamentals color will become deeper and more vivid. Most of the hard shells will become lighter in color and some will tend to have blotches of grayish/white in them as they mature. While a few of the hardshells do just the opposite, and turn a deep dark green.

Some of the ornamentals can be cut from the vine while it is still green and producing blossoms yet. For most of the hard shells, it is suggested that you wait until the vine dies of maturity (turns brown), or the frost kills it, before you pick it. A light frost usually will not damage the gourds. A harder frost will leave like a 'bruise' mark on them, usually a permanent mark on the shell of the gourd.

Frosts may bruise them, but, if left out in a Midwest Winter, may be very beneficial. The freezing winter weather will help make the shell very durable. The skin usually scrapes off easier, the color will normally be more evenly and of a darker tan color. However, this has a tendency to ruin the seeds for planting, if they are not dry before freezing. Allowing the gourds to hang on the arbor or overwinter laying on a wire frame table, allowing them plenty of air, usually works quite well. This will work equally as well on

both ornamentals and hardshells. Ornamental stems become very fragile as they mature and dry. These may want to fall off the vine. Try to keep them off the ground, especially in a wet Winter.

If kept from freezing temperature, gourds will usually produce mold as they dry out. A solution of 1 part of bleach and 10 parts of room temperature water - can be used to wipe off the mold as it appears. Most gourds will dry better if laying on their sides or such that air can get to the blossom end of the gourd.

It is recommended by many, that gourds be fully dried before cutting into them or opening them up. However, some folks do work with them while they are green.

The uniqueness of gourds has very many options. I believe this is why so many people are intrigued with them like they are. Hope your harvest is successful. GOURD LUCK

## How Do I Dry Gourds?

By *Ron Bair*

Date: Unknown

This is a question that is asked a lot. Which in turn causes another question to be asked - What do you want to do with them? Or what do you want them to look like when they are dried? First of all, you need to be sure you have fully mature gourds. A fully mature gourd has been allowed to grow the entire required season. It should be real firm and solid. Give it a pressure test, try to squeeze **it** with your thumb and fingers. A mature gourd should not allow any depression. Gourds are 95% to 99% water when harvested. Remember - In working with gourds, very seldom is there methods that work 100% every time. However, some methods do work extremely better than others. In some cases, methods with good results may be as low as 50%, such as in green-scraping, a method referred to as "trying to fool Mother Nature".

The finish product - "the dried gourd"- The seeds will normally rattle inside the gourd when the gourd is pounded against the heel of your palm. However, the seeds will not always rattle inside the gourd when they are dry. The dried gourd that you desire makes a difference as to how you want to dry it. Do you want a dark colored gourd with mottling effects? Do you just want a dark colored gourd? Or, do you want a light colored gourd with little or no mottling effects? Mottling effects are created by mold growing on the gourd as it dries. Some folks think that when the mold appears it is getting rotten and want to throw it out. NOT TRUE - the mold is the natural drying process that takes place in a warm environment as the moisture leaves the gourd. Only if the gourd shrivels and wrinkles and becomes mushy it is in the rotting process, and this is usually because of an immature gourd.

To achieve a dark colored gourd with mottling effects, simply bring it in out of the weather where it won't freeze. Set it where the air can circulate around it as much as possible. Some folks will use a wire mesh fastened to a frame work, or refrigerator racks setting up on saw horses or such, so that air can get under it as well as around it. Some folks will hang them in a mesh sack such as an onion or potato sack. Rotate them, or shake them around if in a mesh sack, at least once a week or in some instances more often. Some of the Lagenarias, commonly known as hardshells, will have a tendency to lighten in color as they begin to dry, sometimes to almost a grayish color.. As the gourd begins to dry out, mold will appear. This can be left in place to acquire the largest amount of mottling effects possible or, can be wiped off with a soapy water solution and rinsed off with tap water and dried with a towel.

Some folks will use a bleach solution made of 1 part bleach and 10 parts water-instead of soapy water to help kill the mold. NOTE - Do not use hot water with bleach. This bleach mixture can be stored in a jug and used as needed, shake well before using. If you should choose to leave the mold on the gourd until the gourd is completely dried out, in order to gain all the mottling effects possible, the gourd should then be submerged in a tub of warm water, soapy water, or the bleach mixture solution, and scrubbed with a stiff brush or a scouring pad to help remove the mold and the skin. The skin must be removed before crafting can begin. Sometimes a paring knife, a pocket knife, or a large dull knife may be needed to scrape stubborn skin off Try to scrape the gourd in a vertical pattern (from stem to blossom end).

This usually works faster and is more efficient, and less apt to gouge the gourd or leave scraping marks. The skin will normally come off a wet dried gourd easier than a illy dried gourd. This is why it is recommended to soak in a tub of water. Some folks will take gourds outside and allow them to sit in the rain to help loosen the skin. Even though the mold is wiped off periodically, you will probably still have mottling effects. These will make some real attractive designs. This helps enhance the appearance on gourd dishes, dippers, birdhouses, and other varieties of gourd works. Also by using this method of bringing them in out of the weather and not allowing them to freeze, the seeds can be removed when cut open and can be planted later.

Remember – when saving seeds, if the gourds you are working with wasn't grown in isolation or hand pollinated (which most of them aren't), the seeds will be cross-pollinated with the other varieties of gourds they were grown around and your seeds will be a mixture of these varieties. However, these cross-pollinated gourd seeds can produce some real interesting looking gourds, especially for craft work. The finish color of a dried gourd is also determined on how much sunlight is available during the drying process. If the gourds are kept in a dark basement, usually their color will be darker. Using this drying process, gourds will take anywhere from 1 month to 6 months or more to dry. Larger gourds require more time than smaller ones generally.

To achieve a dark colored gourd with little or no mottling effects you can leave the gourds outside and let them freeze. Most of the time, these will not mold under these conditions. Again, these must be fully mature gourds to get good results. Set the gourds upon a trellis, hang in mesh bags, or spread out on wire racks or such to allow for air circulation around them. Allowing them to freeze dry will have a tendency to make the shells more durable, especially with the ornamentals. The skin will become flaky toward the end of the drying process and can usually be removed fairly easy soaking them in warm water and using a scrub brush or scouring pad. Normally it takes until Spring time before the gourds are dry enough to work with. In this freezing process, the embryo inside the seeds will usually be ruined and the seeds will not germinate. The seeds may still be of a good enough quality to make necklaces and used for other gourd craft work.

To achieve a light colored gourd with little or no mottling effects this requires a lot different drying process known as "green-scraping". Using this method you are "trying to fool Mother Nature" by hurrying up the drying process. Scrape the gourds in a vertical pattern with a knife when the gourd is still green. Ornamentals with all their colors are still considered to be green. A fully mature gourd is most important in this process. Some folks will wait till they see that first speck of mold before they begin to scrape green gourds, noting that it is starting to dry. Scrape the green skin with a paring knife or with large gourds a heavy duty utensil may be needed such as an edge of a putty knife or a dull fishermen's fillet knife. Try to use an edge that is not real sharp to help avoid gouging and digging into the shell. After scraping all the skin off, scrub under water with a scouring pad to help remove small particles of skin still on the gourd, wash with soapy water, rinse with tap water and dry with a towel.

Now, to help get the real light tan finished color of the shell, set the scraped green gourd outside in bright sunlight preferably on a breezy day, providing it's above freezing and there isn't a wind chill factor below freezing. The most desirable temperatures would be 550 to 800. Rotate these very often to get consistent drying results. With the small gourds rotate as often as every 2 hours, and with the larger ones rotate them

a couple times a day. Bring them inside before any dew sets in and/or before it rains. Keep the gourds as dry as possible. The bright sunlight will make the gourds a lighter color. The breeze will help them dry out quicker. Wipe any mold off that appears with the bleach solution, rinse, and dry. Put these gourds outside as much as feasibly possible. If unable to set outside, try and set them inside on paper or cardboard in the sunlight and rotate them often. Some folks set them near heat to help speed up the drying process. The drying process inside may take longer than outside because of the lack of a breezy wind to help dry them out. However, a fan can be used to substitute for this. The method of green-scraping at times may cause the gourds to shrivel and collapse, because of the speedy drying process. After the gourd is completely dry, it can be cut and the seeds removed if so desired. The seeds should be of good quality and should be able to be planted. Using this drying process gourds have been known to dry as quickly as 2 weeks with the smaller ones, and about 6 weeks with some of the larger ones.

There are other methods of drying also. Some folks will drill or cut holes in them when they are green to aid in the drying process. This can invite pests and diseases inside the gourd and ruin the seeds and possibly ruin the gourd too. Other folks have set them immediately beside a heat source such as a heat register or wood stove to help speed up the drying process. I have heard of other processes too, such as setting them in freezers and even boiling them. I have not had any experience with any of these methods.

The methods I have gone into detail about are the ones I'm familiar with and am willing to share with you, (marked #). These are not the only drying methods that work to achieve the finished product "the dried gourd", but these are the ones I have experienced, and I hope this helps some of you. These methods will work for both the ornamentals and the hardshells. Try some experimenting of your own. Gourds are a lot of fun and you have numerous variables you can work with. Give gourds a try and happy gourdening !