

Starting Gourd Seeds Indoors

Supplies Recommended

- Plastic growing trays with clear lids
- Heat mats
- Cotton dish towels
- Sandpaper
- Soilless potting mix, such as ProMix
- Marking pen & masking tape
- Thermometer
- 5-6" plastic pots
- Popsicle sticks
- Grow lights
- Timer
- Mister/spray bottle
- Row cover (fabric such as Reemay)
- Prepared garden bed with composed manure

When: A general start date is a month before the safe planting/transplant date. Soil temperature should be 60-65° F and the danger of frost has passed.

How: We sand the shoulders a bit to scarify the seeds. Think of it as a "skinned knee." Note how subtle the sanding is.

Others use a knife or snippers, but we like the sandpaper method. Scarifying opens up the seed husk a little bit, allowing water to soak in more readily.

Image 1. Gourd seeds with shoulders sanded

Sprouting Seeds: Soak the seeds in water for 24 hours. Label glasses with seed variety.

Image 2. Soaking seeds

Then lay them out in flats directly on potting soil and cover with a moist dish towel. We no longer use paper towels; we like to put the seeds directly on the soil better.

Image 3. Seeds in tray, on potting soil & covered with damp towel

It's easier to control the temperature and humidity because the flats come with clear plastic lids which keep both the moisture and heat in, and heating mats can be purchased that are made to fit the flats.

The mat goes under the flat, not within it. Keep a thermometer on top of the towel to monitor the temperature. Keep the temperature around 80-85 degrees.

Be aware that the lid does trap heat. It can get too hot, especially if the sun shines on it. Pay attention, and remove the lid if it's too warm, or turn the lid so it isn't covering the entire flat.

As soon as a root is noticed the seed is planted into a pot with moist potting soil (1/2" deep). Be vigilant, once a seed sprouts, their roots take off. One plant, one pot.

Image 4. Sprouted seeds



Growing Seedlings: We now recommend using 5-6" plastic pots. Plastic allows for a less traumatic transplantation in a few weeks. The roots grow around and around in the peat pots that were used in the past, and the bound-up roots did not spread as easily into the soil after transplantation. Fill the pot with dampened soilless mixture, press down and add more and repack until within ½" of the top of the pot.

Poke a small hole in the middle and insert 1 sprouted seed, sprout end up...about 3" below the top of the soil (deeper for large seeds). Scratch the soil around the seedling and press it slightly. Keep moist, but not sopping wet. Poke in a popsicle stick with variety of seed on it, too.

As soon as the plants are breaking through the potting soil, start using grow lights. Keep the lights as close as possible. You don't want the lights so close that the heat from the lights dries out the plants and fries them, but you don't want them so far away that the plants get leggy. Set the lights on a timer to match the length of day (14-16 hours of light each day). The goal is vibrant, dark green, bushy plants, not spindly, yellow vines.

Image 5. Emerging Seedling

Image 6. Under the lights

Transplanting. A week to 10 days before transplanting, begin to harden the plants off. It's kind of a gradual process. At first, we leave them in the shade, protected from wind, then we move them to sunnier and windier places. We cover them with floating row cover, such as Reemay, to keep the cucumber beetles away even during the hardening-off period. At first the plants get brought in at night, then as nights get warmer, we'll leave them out.

Image 7. Healthy seedling

Most of us are not big-time growers; growing only a couple dozen vines. This allows us to give each plant lots of attention. We grow organically, no insecticides. If you have been building up the soil for several years now, you should continue to do so.

Giving each plant at least 2 wheelbarrows of composted manure is a great start. Dig it into the soil. Each plant gets planted in a fairly large (1 1/2' to 2' in diameter), shallow depression. This helps hold water.

Plants intended to grow on the trellis are planted a few feet from the trellis to allow extra roots to develop along the stem.

After watering a plant in, a ¼ cup or so of diatomaceous earth is poured on the stem of the plant. Diatomaceous earth is a sharp powder. It kills soft bodied insects that try to crawl through it. If a cucumber beetle has laid her eggs around the plant before we planted it, the soft bodied larvae will be killed as they try to crawl up the stem. We've been trying this as an experiment for a couple of years, and it seems to help.

Image 8. Diatomaceous earth on plant stem

Next, a "bonnet" of floating row cover, such as Reemay, is put over the plant with the entire perimeter of the cloth buried. This prevents pests from being able to get to the plant. The bonnet is about a 5 ft. square, large enough to be able to cover the plant for 2 or 3 weeks. As the plants grow, it's kind of like a bunch of large jiffy pops are expanding all over the garden! When the bonnet installation is completed, it's time to move on to the next plant. We don't plant all the plants and then cover them; the cucumber beetles are much too opportunistic.

Image 9. Reemay "bonnet" ready to be placed over the seedling

Image 10. Seedlings in garden, covered with Reemay

Image 11. Plants are now uncovered a few weeks later



Image 1. Gourd seed's sanded "shoulders"



Image 2. Soaking Seeds



Image 3. Seeds in tray, on potting soil & covered with damp towel



Image 4. Sprouted seeds



Image 5. Emerging Seedling



Image 6. Under the lights



Image 7. Healthy seedling



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Starting Seeds Outdoors

Supplies Recommended

- Plastic 1-gallon water jugs
- Thermometer
- Fertile soil with composted manure and other amendments tilled-in
- Gourd seeds that had been soaked in water for 24 hours

If your soil is 65°F you can successfully start seeds directly in the garden...with miniature greenhouses using gallon water jugs to help the seeds germinate.

Cut about 1½” off the bottom of each empty water jug

Plant three seeds in each “hill” (we suggest hills be about 6-8 feet apart). Water. Cover these planted hills with the top portion of the jug (no cap/lid, except at night). Mound soil up about half the way up the jug to help hold it in place. (If it’s windy you can tie the jug handle to a stake for extra security).

When they have sprouted, choose the strongest seedling and cut (do not pull) the others so the healthiest plant will have access to all of the nutrients in the soil.

Each day after sprouting, gently lift the jug up slightly, giving it a quarter turn and then setting it back down. Fresh air will circulate. Water if needed. Depending on the weather conditions, the jug can be removed for portions of the day starting on day 4, but the jug goes back on at night. Gradually increase the time uncovered during daytime over several days. If cooler days (45°F) or nights are forecasted, the jugs can be placed over the young plants as needed.