

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Gourds have been grown for generations and have had a great many uses. They have been used for making kitchen utensils, drinking cups, birdhouses and ornaments to name a few. Gourds belong to the Cucurbitaceae family which includes cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and squash. Gourds have many different shapes, sizes and colors. Even their flowers are different. One variety has large, pure white, very showy blossoms.

When you plant gourds, plant the seeds in hills four to six feet apart and like squash or pumpkins, plant several seeds in each hill. You will find that gourds grow best in a sunny location and after all danger of frost is gone. Gourd vines are real scramblers and can easily grow over fences or along the ground.

Gourds should not be harvested until they are fully developed and the colors are fully developed. Pick them with the stems attached and wash them with a bit of detergent in water to remove the surface dirt and grime.

Dry your gourds by storing them first at 80 degrees F. with 80 percent humidity for about 10 days or at 70 degrees F. for three weeks. Keep the gourd's surface dry and don't over crowd them. This will help prevent bruising and discoloration, which can lead to rotting. After the first period is over you can then store them at 50 to 60 degrees F. in single layers with good air circulation. Again, do not crowd them together.

Continue storage for several weeks until dry. Please keep in mind that, depending upon the size and shape of the gourds, they may take several months to dry. The best way to know when it is dry is to shake it. If you can hear the seeds rattle inside, then it is dry. Rewash with soapy water. You can use a steel wool pad, but be fairly gentle.

Dry with a soft towel. If you decide to paint or decorate the gourds, be sure to allow each coat to dry for 24 hours. Then cover with shellac or lacquer to protect it from the elements.

To make your gourd into a birdhouse, drill an entry hole one-and-one-half inches in diameter several inches up from the base. Shake out all the seeds and residue. You can save the seeds to replant next spring. Using a one-quarter inch drill bit, drill several holes in the bottom for drainage. Then drill another one-quarter inch hole slightly under the opening for the perch. Finally, drill two holes through the neck to hang it on the tree. Insert your perch and your hanging cord and you are done.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.