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**May 2005
Kids Garden News**

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by Barb Cesal

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Plant of the Month: The Gourd

Many of your students may have seen gourds at "work": as autumn porch and table decorations, as bath sponges, or as birdhouses. But are they aware that people have used gourds for millennia, and for lots of different purposes? Explore history, social studies, botany, and art with these versatile vines. But be careful -- growing and crafting with gourds can be habit-forming!

Scientific Name: There are three different categories of commonly grown gourds: *Cucurbita sp.*, *Lagenaria sp.*, and *Luffa sp.*

History and Uses: Archeologists have found evidence that wherever there were gourds, ancient civilizations put them to use.

Cucurbita gourds are believed to be native to the Americas. These ornamental gourds come in many bright colors and varying shapes and sizes, and are commonly used for tabletop decorations. When dried the brittle shells can crack easily. The plants produce yellow flowers that open during the day.

Lagenaria gourds, such as bottle gourds and calabash, are the toughest and most versatile of the group. Archaeologists believe that *Lagenaria* originated in tropical areas of Africa, and evidence suggests that the buoyant fruits traveled by ocean currents and dispersed their seed on other continents. Some species grow quite large and when dried their hard shells are as tough as wood. They are sturdy enough to serve as food vessels, utensils, storage containers, musical instruments, even buoys for fishing nets -- and people have used them in all these different ways for millennia! Here in the North America they are the favorite gourd of crafters and artists. They produce white flowers that bloom at night.



Smooth-skinned gourds in the foreground are of the *Lagenaria* group.

Luffa gourds are also known as the vegetable sponge. Luffas are native to India, where people eat the unripe fruits like cucumbers. Once luffas mature, their outer shell hardens, the inside dries out, and the fibrous interior and can be used as a sponge or scrubber. Luffas produce yellow flowers and need the longest growing season of all the gourds.

Cultural Information: Gourds are in the Cucurbitaceae or Cucumber family. They are closely related to melons, squash, pumpkins, and cucumbers.

Most gourds are warm-season annuals that require a long growing season of 100 to 180 days (depending on the species). If you wish to sow seeds directly in the garden, wait until soil temperatures reach 70°. In cool climates with short growing seasons, start seeds in peat pots indoors and transplant them to the garden once the soil has warmed. To hasten maturity, build a growing tent for your gourds. Find out how in [Growing a Musical Instrument: Moving into the Garden](#).

Gourds need full sun and soil that drains well to produce a good crop.

Arrange plants in hills or rows. To save space and prevent fruit scarring, train vines to grow up a trellis or fence.



luffa on the vine.

Plants in Curcurbitaceae usually produce male and female reproductive parts in separate flowers. Many new gardeners are discouraged when the first blossoms of the season drop without producing fruit. This is because the male flowers often appear first. Eventually female flowers emerge, insects carry pollen from male flowers to female flowers, and fruit will set. (See [Growing a Musical Instrument](#) for instructions on hand-pollinating blossoms.)

Gourds are not tolerant of cold weather, so harvest them before the first frost. They are ready to harvest when stems dry and turn brown. Use a knife or pruners to cut them from the vine. After harvest, place gourds in a dark, dry, well-ventilated area. It can take anywhere from one to six months for gourds to dry fully.

[Click here](#) or [here](#) for more information about growing gourds.

For more helpful publications, project tutorials, and seasonal tips, visit [The American Gourd Society Web site](#).

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