

BIRDHOUSE GOURDS

Birdhouse Gourd - planting summary

SEED PLANTING DEPTH: ½"

PLANT 6 SEEDS PER "HILL", THIN TO 3 PLANTS AFTER 2-3 REAL LEAVES

DAYS TO GERMINATION: 7 – 10

DAYS TO PRODUCE MATURE GOURDS: 90 - 110

VINE LENGTH: 12-15 feet

GROWS BEST IN: FULL SUN, AVERAGE, SLIGHTLY ACIDIC SOIL

PLANT ON A FENCE, TRELIS OR OTHER STURDY STRUCTURE

If you have a growing season of at least 90-100 days and plenty of space, you can be the proud owner of several hard-shelled gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*), sometimes known as Birdhouse Gourds, by fall.

The vines will quickly cover a trellis, hide a chain-link fence, wrap around trees, and then keep growing! Despite the vine's need for vast amount of space, it's a fascinating plant to grow that adults and kids love. The resulting gourds can be made into birdhouses, feeders, baskets, dishes or planters.

The vine requires a long hot growing season of 90 - 100 days. Since gourds demand a long growing season, they can be started indoors 4 weeks prior to planting outdoors. I have successfully started gourds in regular pots with soil and transplanted them to the garden although instructions I have seen on the internet say that gourd seeds should be planted in individual containers, such as peat pots, since their roots will not like being disturbed during transplanting. You may want to try some each way to see what works for you.



Gourd Seedling Id

If you started your plants indoors, you need to start "conditioning" the plants to the great outdoors a few days before transplanting. Outdoors generally has lower humidity, less frequent rainfall and higher light levels, and if you plant your babies out directly, they may wilt. Instead, start taking them outside in the shade for a few hours a day—then letting them have some direct sunlight for a couple hours a day, shade the rest. Let them wilt just a tiny, tiny bit while they're outside.

Give them at least 3-4 days of this sort of "abuse" before you plant them out. This is called "hardening off" and it generally results in plants that just keep right on growing without breaking stride. Once the danger of frost is past and your plants are hardened off, plant the peat pots in tilled soil that has a bit of compost or fertilizer added.

I plant my seeds directly in the soil on my fence line, planting about 6 seeds together in a 'hill' (I clear a spot about 2' long and 1' wide and about 2" below grade so it will hold water, then I make a trench about 12" long in that spot and space them in there), ½" deep, and allowing 30' of fence (15' in each direction) per hill. When they have 2 or 3 of their first real leaves, thin to leave the strongest 3 vines per hill. You may also plant the vines where they can climb onto a STRONG trellis or even a tree. (If you allow your vines to grow along the ground, as pumpkins do, the resulting gourds may not be symmetrical in shape.) Gourds like a soil pH around 6-6.5, slightly acidic. If you plant during dry months, you will need to water the vines until they are established or there is heavy rain at least weekly. Once you have vines growing, do not fertilize them again or you'll have beautiful leaves and few gourds. The only pest I have had a problem with on gourds is leaf-miner. Watch for their tell-tale "tunnels" on your leaves and treat with appropriate insecticide.



Once the vine is about 10 to 15 feet long, pinch off the tip of the main runner so that the plant will send out side branches. It's on these side branches that the female flowers (and gourds) grow. This is very important, otherwise, you may have many flowers but few gourds.

There are male flowers that need to pollinate the female ones. Female flowers have a little bulge behind the flower that looks a bit like a little birdhouse gourd. Male flowers only have a stem. If you have plenty of bees and insects, they will do all of the work naturally for you. Or at night when the flowers open up, take a bit of the male pollen and shake it onto the female flowers. One vine may produce up to 12 gourds, although the average is more like 5 - 6. If a gourd begins growing low on the fence and touches the ground, you may want to put a small piece of Styrofoam under it to keep the moisture in the ground from rotting the gourd.

The vines will love many long drinks of water throughout the summer. But when autumn approaches, do not give them any supplemental waterings. Let the vines wither and die as winter approaches.

Leave the gourds on the vine until a light frost or the stems turn brown. If you need to pick a gourd before the frost, the gourd should be very firm to the touch. Cut the gourd with an inch or more of stem. Wash the gourds in soapy water. Household bleach may be added to the water if desired, and may help delay mold formation. After the first frost, cut the gourds from the vines and put them in a dry warm place on a screen or hang them. It is important that air can circulate all about them, drying them. If a gourd becomes soft and begins to rot or becomes shriveled, throw it away (save the seeds!!). However, a bit of mold on the gourds is fine and normal. It may take 6 months to dry large gourds. They will be ready when they are very light in weight, and you can hear the seeds inside rattle when you shake the birdhouse gourd.

Drying

Dry the gourd fruits naturally by placing in an area with good air circulation. Bringing the gourds indoors may help them dry faster, but gourds can be dried outdoors even in cold areas, however repeated freezing and thawing will affect the viability of seeds. When the seeds rattle, the gourd is dry and ready for crafting. How long it takes a gourd to dry depends on the drying environment -- the warmer and the better the circulation, the faster the water will evaporate from the gourd. Most moderate-sized hardshell gourds will be dry by Christmas. Larger or particularly thick-shelled gourds may not dry for several more months. Light may help to retard formation of mold, but the mold on the outside of gourds is a natural part of the drying process; as long as the gourd remain firm to the touch, do not discard it. Turning the gourds and wiping off the mold on a weekly basis may help the gourds dry sooner. If you live in a particularly humid area, it's hard to get the gourds to dry. I've found that wiping them down with a weak solution of weed killer (like 'Round Up') will help remove the outside green layer, allowing more air flow to dry the gourd on the inside. Scraping the outside green layer off with the back of a butter knife is another option that works well but is time consuming.

Saving Seeds

Seeds from your gourds, whether the gourds have been dried or not, can be saved for planting next year. If I harvest seeds from a still green gourd, I rinse them off (there is a 'slime' on them in the green gourds) and place them in a warm, dry area to dry completely. I store all my seeds in breathable containers (not plastic bags). Make note, however: Growing many types of gourds or squash in close proximity to each other WILL affect your seeds by creating cross-pollinated gourds. The gourds themselves will be fine, but the seeds may well produce something that does not resemble your original. In reality, there is no 100% guaranteed distance to avoid cross-pollination because bees and moths can fly long distances, but I keep my gourds 200 – 300 feet apart to considerably reduce the chances of cross pollination.

How to Make the Gourd into a Bird House

Once the gourds are dried, they can be crafted in a number of different ways. You can do just about anything to them that you can do with wood. But a popular use of the gourds is to make birdhouses for Purple Martins. In fact, it is believed that Native Americans have been using these gourds as houses for the martins for hundreds of years.

1. Soak the gourds in a pail of hot soapy water for 20 - 30 minutes. Then using a metal "scrubby," clean the gourd, scraping the gourd until it is perfectly clean. The gourd may have discolorations that will not be scraped off. These spots are normal and will be covered up later.
2. Dry the gourd completely. Select a gourd for your birdhouse that has a diameter of at least 8" and preferably no larger than 14".
3. Drill a 2 1/8" hole for the entrance on the side of the gourd. As you drill into the gourd, make sure that the gourd's walls are at least 1/4" thick. If the walls are thinner, the house may get too hot for the martins. If the walls are too thin, use this gourd for another use and start over with a new gourd.
4. Drill small holes in the bottom of the gourd for drainage.
5. Scrape out the seeds (these seeds are likely still good – save them!) and membrane from inside the gourd. If you pour some water into the gourd before cleaning it out, you'll reduce the dust that can irritate some people's eyes.
6. To preserve the gourd, mix together copper sulfate in 5 gallons of warm water. Copper sulfate is found in hardware stores and home centers as a root killer in the plumbing section of the store. Check the labels of the products to find it. Protect your hands with rubber gloves. Soak the gourds in the mixture for about 15 minutes. Let dry completely. It may take the gourds several days to become perfectly dry.
7. Paint the outside of the gourds with white house paint. Check the drainage holes to make sure the paint did not clog them. White paint seems to attract Purple Martins the best.
8. Drill a hole through the top of the neck of the gourd and attach a piece of thick wire through the holes, twisting the wire together at the top to make a hanger for the birdhouse.
9. Hang a colony of these martin houses together on a pole since they prefer to nest together in colonies.
10. If you have smaller gourds, you can certainly use them as houses for other birds, such as blue birds or chickadees. If you wish other birds than martins and wrens to nest, mount the birdhouse to a pole or fence post so it does not swing in the breeze.