



## Crop Profile: Gourds

**Although they aren't edible, gourds are a useful and beautiful vining plant that you can add to your garden.**

Gourds have interesting shapes and sturdy skins that give them the ability to be crafted into a number of items for the home.

Warty, curvy, gnarled and colorful, gourds seem to be created to fascinate and delight. A cousin of the squash, many people harvest or purchase gourds each fall with no purpose in mind other than to admire their artistic forms. But gourds have a long history of culinary and other uses that make them an economically important crop in many parts of the world.

Tropical in origin, gourds are considered among the earliest domesticated plants in the New World. Their cultivation dates back to 8,000 B.P. In modern times, gourds play significant medical, ritual, practical, artistic and decorative roles in many cultures.

Although they aren't edible, ornamental gourds are productive vines. With interesting textures and forms, these fruits are most often used as decorations and are extremely prolific, with each vine yielding several gourds. Large-fruited varieties, like Bottle (which has an edible counterpart of the same name, used in Indian cuisine), Speckled Swan and Dipper, will need extra support to prevent vines from breaking, but smaller-fruited selections won't. Gourds can be started from seeds indoors under lights but are easily grown by direct-seeding shortly after the last spring frost. They require a soil pH of 6.5 to 7.0.

Around the world, the range of products fashioned from gourds is astounding. Their bulbous shapes and sturdy skins make them ideal for hollowing out and drying. Once dry, they're strong and often watertight. This lends them perfectly to kitchen and garden use as bowls, bottles, scoops, cups and, of course, birdhouses. In fact, early clay pottery is thought to have been shaped to mimic gourds.

Around the home, gourds also serve as lamps, sculptures, masks, and other decorative and ritual items, the skins of which are often painted, carved or tattooed to enhance their exotic beauty. The large, spherical gourd varieties can be used as resonating chambers in percussion instruments, such as drums, or the Brazilian, single-stringed berimbau. An indigenous New Guinea culture, the Dani, used a variety of shapes and lengths of gourds as body coverings.

Read more about growing edible vines.

About the Authors: Adrienne L. Shtop is a writer and photographer who follows the squash trail each fall from the Hudson River Valley to the Green Mountains and back.

Horticulturist Jessica Walliser dreams of growing Eastern Prince, a fruit-bearing magnolia vine, in her zone-6 garden. She is co-host of KDKA radio's The Organic Gardeners in Pittsburgh and author of several gardening books, including Grow Organic (St. Lynn's Press, 2007) and Good Bug Bad Bug (St. Lynn's Press, 2008).