

Growing Long Gourds

By Ron Wallis

When first asked to write an article on my experiences in growing long gourds I was a little reluctant, in that it has just been two seasons that I have been doing so and whatever I had to say was that of a pure amateur. However, I felt it was a good chance to spread the word so that others can enjoy similar experiences in the garden. This past year (2004) I grew one that broke the world record of 110 and 5/8 inches set in 1994. with one that grew to the length of 114 inches and came in second as tabulated by the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth.

Germination of Seeds:

Germination of long gourds seeds can be a problem if one thinks that they can be just thrown in the ground and expected to sprout and grow. My experience has been the latter (which turned out to be failures) until I started to create an environment for the seeds which is conducive to seed germination. Our growing season in the Ottawa area (Lat. 45-29; Long. 75-40) is rather short so we have to start about a month after the frost is out of the ground. To speed the process up I have built a "cold-frame" which enables me to create a mini sub-climate in a 3 foot by 2 foot wooden box with a glass cover. The seeds are planted in small containers filled with a potting soil mix, which is available at any gardening centre. The "cold-frame" was placed in the garden plot at a location that gets a maximum amount of sun. During the day the interior of the "cold-frame" gets up around 85 degrees and this heat draws moisture from the ground creating a humid atmosphere within. However in the evening when the sun goes down, so does the temperature within the "cold-frame". In order to help maintain as constant a warm temperature as possible, I set up a small heater within the "cold-frame" connected to a sensor which would turn the heater on in the early evening and switch off around the time that the sun started to shine on the glass. This set-up has given me great results for the past two springs with 75% success.

Soil Preparation:

Long gourds don't need a large growing plot. Last year I grew two plants in a 6 feet by 3 feet plot which produced 5 long gourds one of which was 114 inches in length on one plant and four others ranging from 92 inches to 94 inches on the other. The soil in my area is mainly clay so I mixed up a concoction of sandy soil with two year old composted old cow manure and general yard compost.

Transplanting:

Once the seedlings grew to the height of approximately 10 inches which took about 3 weeks I transplanted them into the growing plot. I built a shield made from plastic sheeting around each of the plants to protect them from the wind. At this time I also staked each plant so their vines had something on which to climb.

Trellis:

Once the roots take hold in the new soil the vine grows at unbelievable speed and preparations have to be made so that the vine can transfer from the stakes to the top of the trellis, which in my case is 8 feet above the ground. Here I used a section of an old net attached to the end of the trellis and hung down to the ground at the base of the plants and attached to the ground. The top of my trellis is made up of 4 foot by 8 foot panels framed in 2 inch x 2 inch spruce and covered in 6 inch by 6 inch wire mesh panels. The total area of the top was made up of three panels which is slightly less than 100 sq. ft. and this structure comfortably supported the two plants.

Pruning, Insecticides and Fungicides

As the plant grows there is an incredible amount of foliage, and unless the plants are pruned you will have a real mess. While pruning, care must be taken not to cut the main vine. This may sound like a frivolous statement but when you have a vine growing like these do they all look alike.

In order to prevent infestations of insects and mildew fungus, I sprayed every week, alternating the applications of the insecticide and fungicide throughout the entire growing season.

Pollinating:

Keep in mind that these gourds originated in the tropics where they are normally pollinated by nocturnal flying native insects. In my neck of the woods there doesn't seem to be any insects which can pollinate these plants. Perhaps it's because the blooms only open in the evening when our main pollinators have gone to bed. I found that early evening was a good time to play Mother Nature. First identify the female blossom. The female blossom has attached to it what appears to be a miniature fuzzy long gourd about two inches in length while the male blossom stands alone. Another factor to take into account when pollinating is the location of the female blossom on your trellis. It should be in a location where as it grows it won't be obstructed by a part of the trellis frame or in an otherwise awkward location.

Identify and remove the petals on the male blossom and remove it from the vine. Once the petals are removed you will be able to see the pollen on the stamen of the male plant. The pistil of the female blossom is covered with a sticky substance. Using the stamen as a miniature paintbrush, place the pollen grains on the sticky substance of the pistil. The grains of pollen will adhere to the pistil. The more grains of pollen that is transferred the better the chances are that the pollination will take place. The growth of the miniature long gourd will start within a couple of days.

Pollinating in this manner enables you to plan where you want the long gourds to grow on the trellis. You will notice over the summer that there will be numerous blossoms that produce gourds that grow to about 6 to 7 inches in length and remain at that size. This is because they were never pollinated.

The growing period for these long gourds is about 40 days with the bulk of the growing happening in the first 30 days from between 3 to 7 inches each day. The last 10 days the growth is minimal.

Once the long gourds have grown at least 4 feet it is wise to help support the stem from excess weight from the gourd. You can do this by ensuring that the stem isn't bent over a sharp portion of the trellis or supporting wire mesh. Place wads of cloth between the stem and frame to prevent injury to the stem. In my case I made a collar made from strips of cloth and wrapped it around the top of the gourd just below the stem bulge. The collar was held in place with a large hose clamp(s). Then heavy twine was attached to the hose clamp in at least three locations and tied to the trellis taking some weight off the stem. This is also very helpful in strong winds, where constant motion may weaken the stem.

After the long gourd has stopped growing let it hang for another week or so and then remove it from vine. It is best to store the gourd in a cool area with some ventilation such as a basement. The skin will harden and the interior will evaporate leaving only the seeds to rattle around inside. Its weight will be reduced by approximately 90% within four months

In closing I would like to say that growing these long gourds has been a very interesting and enjoyable experience. It has become a great conversation topic with the neighbours and visitors who are interested in seeing the progress of these beasts through the summer. Meeting new growers at weigh-offs/measure-offs is also a place to compare notes and exchange seeds. I hope this article will be of help to new growers and if your readers have any questions or suggestions, please don't hesitate to email or write to me.

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