How to grow Long Gourds
by John & Chris Lyons

The father and son team of John & Chris Lyons have been growing long gourds for many years now. Over those years they are responsible for growing some of the longest ever grown. They have agreed to write this article to help other growers with their quest to grow these incredibly long vegetables and to promote them with other growers of giant vegetables. I want to thank Chris & John for taking the time to write up this article and Phil Hunt and the GVGO for letting us reprint it.

Chris Lyons (left) poses with his 116-5/8" new world record long gourd and his father John (right) with his 111 5/8" entry at the 2005 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto

Growing long gourds has become popular with many giant vegetable growers because they provide a great opportunity to grow something quite different in a relatively smaller area with less time and resources. Gourd vines can grow up just about anything, but an overhead trellis is the best way to go if you want to be competitive and have control over the plant & vines. We grow our long gourds on two trellises, which are 10ft tall and are about 10ft x 10ft square on top. They are constructed with 4x 4 main posts and 2x4 framing on the growing sides and top. There are 4x8 sheets of lattice on two sides for the vines to grow up on and a 1x3 cross frame on the top, which allows for easy access to the vines. It is better to build a strong structure that will support the weight of several large gourds. We have found that you will need at least 5 ft of side and top width to train a gourd vine or two plants on a 10 x 10 trellis. You should try to face the vining side of the trellis towards the west to southwest to get the best exposure to the sun and allow the gourds to be grown in the shade underneath the vine and trellis. This will prevent the sun and wind from prematurely hardening off the soft skin that is necessary to grow really long fruit.

Preparing the soil is always an important step. Every spring we mix about 3 wheelbarrow loads of well composted manure into each planting site, which is about 5ft x 5ft and dug to a depth of at least 1ft at the base of each trellis. A PH level of about 7.0 is ideal and we add some peat moss each year to help keep our PH at that level.

Germinating seeds can sometimes be a bit of a challenge, as some seeds can be more difficult to start than others. We soak the seeds for up to 8 hours in a 3% hydrogen peroxide, which is diluted up to 10% in water. After soaking, the seeds are wrapped in damp paper towels and put into sealed plastic bags. They are then placed on a heat tray at about 85 degrees F (30 degrees C.) until germination begins after a few days. The germinating seeds are then planted into 6" pots to prevent the plants from becoming root bound. I have found that most varieties of long gourds are best to be germinated in late April/early May. Gourd plants that are grown under artificial light will be leggy and weak and must be tied to a stake right from the beginning. Plants that are kept in natural sunlight will be stocker and easier to handle, but are slower to start vining.

Early protection includes mini-greenhouses for the Lyons' long gourd plants

We like to transplant to the growing site around mid-May or when conditions permit. I like to plant them at least a foot back from the trellis and protect the plant in a mini greenhouse. A stick is used to guide the vine to the trellis, about 3 ft above the ground. If the plant is already staked in the pot, transplant the plant and stake together. Fertilize with a 10-52-10 water-soluble fertilizer the first few weeks, and then switch to a balanced 10-10-10 or 20-20-20. Don't forget to spray for insects and disease as required. Once the plants get established and begin vining, you can start to prune off excessive side growth and train the main vine over the top of the trellis, allowing it to grow over the top while removing the excessive side vines.

Long gourds generally open in the evening and are done by mid-morning. Look for the white flowers and a 3-4" fruit. Pollinate with a few male flowers, but be careful as the female bloom is fragile and pollinating must be done with a light touch. I have found that not many female blossoms will be successfully open pollinated.

If you want a competitive long gourd you should limit them to 1 or 2 fruits per plant after they reach 18"-24" in length. Try to select ones that are slender and that are the fastest growing. Make sure the gourd's vine is secure and will not pull down through the trellis. You may have to provide extra support for the vine at this area of the plant.

This is where good genetics pay off. A seed that is a fast grower will do well, as most growth will be done in 4 weeks. During the peak week of growth, they can gain 5"-6" per day before they start to slow down. At this time you can start to pollinate another batch of gourds. Some long gourds become thick and heavy as they mature and may require extra support. For many years we have skewered heavy gourds with a stainless steel pin, near the top and used cloth strips or soft rope to tie it off or gourd may eventually break off the vine.

Chris Lyons shows us some of the long gourds under his trellis

After the gourd has stopped growing for several days, we carefully cut them down and store them in the basement. They will last for months like this and become harder and less likely to be broken. Sometimes we tape a long board to the gourd even before we cut it down, to make sure it doesn't break while we are moving it. Especially, if it's a long one.

Watering is always a little subjective due to soil and weather conditions, but there is a guideline. In the early season we keep them damp, usually watering 2-3 times a week about the way the pumpkins are watered and during the hot weather every other day and sometimes every day when the gourds are running. We frequently test the soil's moisture level with a soil probe as we do with the pumpkins. When the gourds growth slows up then the watering must be reduced as well with less water per watering. Gourds like to be kept damp but not too wet. Usually they receive 4 gals of water per plant a day during peak growth but that need can vary in different soil and weather conditions.