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## **Gourd Harvest**

*By Ron Bair*

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As fall is rapidly approaching, so is gourd harvest time. Many of us have been anxiously waiting to pick our gourds. But wait! Don't pick them too early. This is a very common mistake. The gourds need to be fully mature. The vines should be turning brown and dying back, and the stems of the gourds should be turning brown also. The gourd itself should be very firm and hard to squeeze.

Most people in Indiana will wait till it frosts a couple times before harvesting. The light frosts won't generally harm the gourds if fully matured. If gourds are picked and harvested before they are fully mature they may spoil and rot. A lot of people have made this mistake of harvesting them too early and end up with big disappointments when they shrivel up and rot. An immature gourd will not maintain its shape. Generally, the most mature gourds will be nearest the base of the plant. Commonly, there will be immature gourds near the end of the vines. In essence, the first gourds on the plant will be the first to mature.

Upon harvesting your gourds, an anvil pruner works quite well to cut the stem from the vine. Try to leave at least a couple inches of stem with your gourds. Excess and unwanted stem can be cut again later.

All gourds will generally become moldy during the drying out process. The molding is natural; it is Mother Nature's way of the moisture escaping from within the gourd. When gourds are harvested they are about 95% or more water. They will lose all their moisture as they dry out. During the drying out process a person may want to periodically wipe the mold off, or they may choose to let it dry naturally with the molding effects embedded into the shell of the gourd. If you should choose to wipe the mold off, some people will mix 10 parts of room temperature water to 1 part of bleach and wipe this solution with a moistened cloth over the gourd. Rinse with clean water thoroughly and wipe dry.

Gourds may take two to six months, or longer, to become completely dried. Generally, the larger the gourd, usually takes a longer drying time. Gourds need plenty of air circulation during drying. Rotation is very important for a quicker drying time. Try to rotate from bottom to top at least once a month, or more often. If gourds are not rotated during drying process they may develop a ball of hard mass consisting of seeds and pith. When the gourd is shaken it sounds like a hard ball inside them upon drying. If rotated periodically, a person should be able to hear the seeds rattle when dried. Once the seeds begin to rattle they are dry enough to cut open and start crafting.

Gourds may be left outside over winter hanging on the vines or set aside somewhere else. They still need good air circulation around them. It is advised not to let them sit directly on the ground. By setting on the ground they can absorb more moisture and cause interference with the drying process, and may even cause them to rot where they set.

All gourds, both the ornamentals and the hardshells, have a thin layer of skin that needs to be removed before crafting begins. The skin can be removed when they are completely dried, or during the drying process. Sometimes, some of the skin will peel off when you wipe the mold off. Other times it may be very stubborn and may need to be scraped off with a knife or similar tool. Soaking the gourds in warm water will aid in skin removal. A copper scouring pad will help remove small particles.

Gourds can be lots of fun raising them. Give gourds a try and have a successful harvest.