

## Luffa - The Freak Of The Gourd World

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Date: Unknown

Gourds are grown for their beautiful colors, unusual markings, weird shapes and their durable shells. EXCEPT ..... THE LUFFA. Luffas are grown for their fibrous interiors and are commonly referred to as "the vegetable sponge" or "dishrag gourd." The luffa (also spelled Loofah) is the only gourd in which the outer shell is peeled away and discarded. Once this is done and the numerous seeds are shaken out, the remaining "skeleton" is washed to remove excess fiber and your homegrown sponge is ready to use!

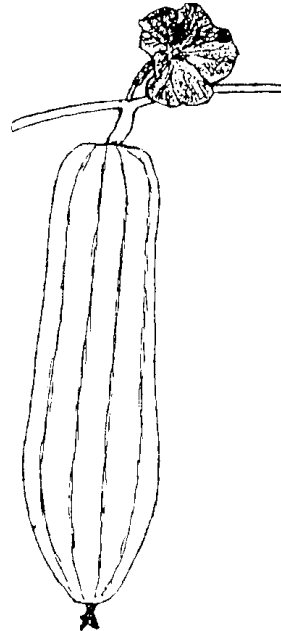
Uses for luffa are numerous and new ones are thought of all the time. AS the common name implies, they are used for bath and cosmetic sponges to remove dead skin cells, stimulate circulation and provide an invigorating bath. In the kitchen a whole sponge can be stuck down into a glass and clean the sides and bottom all at once. Stick the forks through it to clean between the tines. The "dishrag" sponge will not scratch "No Stick" pan surfaces. A third one could be used in the garage to clean bugs from the windshield and headlamps of your car. Or the whole car! Or your boat! Or if you are a hunter, the barrel of your rifle.

They can be cut into slices (with a serrated knife) or cut lengthwise with scissors and flattened to make hot pads or table mats, and angel or dragon wings. They can be made into artificial flowers, toys, dolls and decorative medallions. They can be colored easily by using a common fabric dye. In other countries or in the past, they have been used to make door mats, sandals, insoles, hats and insulation for helmets, soundproofing wallboard (pressed through steam rollers), stuffing for mattresses and saddles, and filters for steam and diesel engines.

The seed of *Luffa aegyptiaca* or cylindrical luffa is fairly large, hard and almost black. It is best to scarify or thin the seed then soak it in water overnight before planting. In zone 5, it is wise to start the seeds inside and set plants out when soil temperatures warm (60 degrees Fahrenheit) and there is no danger of frost. They need plenty of sun and water. A trellis or fence will allow the gourds to hang and grow straight. The vine will grow 25 feet or more but can be pruned. They require up to 150 good growing days to mature.

Do not pick until the gourds begin to turn yellow or brown on the ends. The bottom or operculum should be easy to remove. When squeezed, they will feel spongy and the skin will have started to separate from the interior fiber. The skin has strong fibers that run end to end and act like a zipper and can help remove the outer skin. Your fingers will feel soft and slick and good from handling the fresh sponge.

The seeds are contained in three chambers the length of the gourd and most can be shaken out by beating the sponge against the inside of a bucket. The



excess fiber must be washed out in a bucket or pan. Don't use the sink or washing machine or you will surely have a clogged drain! You may need several changes of water and this process will probably remove more seeds. The sponge will soften somewhat. Hang the sponges on a clothesline in the sun to dry. The sun will help to whiten the sponge.

You can also allow the fruit to dry completely before (or after) harvesting. The skin will become hard and brown and must then be soaked so it can be removed. The sponge may become stained but can be bleached with a cup of chlorine bleach in a gallon of water. Rinse thoroughly before use.

Another variety, *Luffa operculata*, is a small round ball about two inches in diameter. The shells on these are "thorny" looking. They can be used to decorate Autumn wreaths or painted and used for ornamenting other things without removing this interesting shell. The small sponge inside, although difficult to remove, is a very soft luffa. It can easily be dyed and can be cut into wonderful flower shapes. Try this little sponge for a different effect with your sponge painting.

REFERENCES:

*The Gourd Book* by Charles B. Heiser, Jr.

*Gourds in Your Garden* by Ginger Summit

<http://www.ccs.ncsu.edu/deps/hort/hil/hil=120.html>

<http://www.ext.missouri.edu/agebb/mac>

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