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So Many Gourds, So Little Time

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GARDEN NOTES

SO MANY GOURDS, SO LITTLE TIME

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Fall-23

Now that we've got that pumpkin season out of the way, you can start thinking about some more creative gourds. Be the hit of the neighborhood with a turk's turban jack-o-lantern next year.

"Dolphin, bicolor pear, water jug, and white egg gourds simply sound cool, and are so fun to ask for at the garden center," says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

Gourds are closely related to pumpkins and squash, he explains. Most originated in either China or Mexico. Although gourds are usually grown for ornamental reasons, a few are edible and even taste good. Normally they are not considered to be a major vegetable in the garden, but are fun to grow. They can add interest to the garden or landscape, and help decorate the home for the holidays.

"I recently visited a large formal garden in North Carolina that had a 150-foot trellis covered with different kinds of gourds," Goodspeed says. "When growing gourds, be sure to provide a trellis, fence or something else for them to climb. The tendrils on the plants allow them to attach to the support without much help. Fruit grown from a trellis have a much better shape than those which lie on the ground."

Unfortunately, most gourds require a long growing season — something most parts of Utah lack he says. Plant the seeds after the last frost or start the seeds indoors about the first of April. Transplant them into the garden about the middle of May. This will give them a few extra days of growth to ripen the fruit.

"Gourd plants can spread as far as 100 feet," Goodspeed says. "This is not common, but I have seen them spread a good 50 feet in Utah, when grown in good, fertile soil, and given proper care and watering. They can cover a trellis by late July and have fruit hanging down by mid to late August."

Plant the seeds two to three feet apart, so they will cover and fill in faster, he explains. Set out one to two plants in each hole, or drop three to five seeds in each location and thin after they begin to grow. Apply an all purpose fertilizer at the time of planting. They may require an extra shot of nitrogen throughout the growing season if growth slows or if the lower leaves begin to

turn yellow and die.

Ornamental gourds can be harvested when the outer shell is hard and dry, Goodspeed adds. Most will withstand a light frost, but should be harvested before a killing freeze damages the fruit. Leave two to three inches of stem on the fruit when harvesting, then clean, and they are ready for display.

“Ornamental gourds are given such descriptive names,” he says. “A few of the smaller popular varieties include the speckled swan (green with white speckles), crown of thorns (multicolored with some striping), turban (many colors available) and the spoon (green and yellow). Most of the names describe their appearance. Some larger varieties include caveman's club, giant water jug, large turk's turban and long siphon.

“Don't you just love the names?” Goodspeed says. “All vegetables should be given fun names like the gourds. How about fat, squatty eggplant, UFO kohlrabi, volleyball cabbage, or baseball bat zucchini? Well, at least it gives you something to think about over the winter months.”

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