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## **Gourd Harvest Time**

*By Ron Bair*

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A question asked by many, - "When do I pick my gourds?" While many of us are anxious to harvest our gourds, quite a few folks have already started, namely with the ornamentals, and some of the smaller hardshells.

A good rule of thumb to consider when picking all gourds is - To make sure they are mature! A mature gourd will be firm and solid, yet with a somewhat hollow sound when "thumped". When squeezing them with pretty good pressure, very little, if any, depression or indentation should be felt. Don't be mistaken, a mature gourd can be squashed with too much pressure! Gourds should be considered mature by length of 'required' growing season also. Some ornamentals will mature in 90 days or less, while some of the larger hardshells need 120 to possibly 150 days to mature. Typically, you can think for the most part, the larger the gourd, the longer the growing season required. The smaller hardshells, and possibly a few of the medium size hardshell gourds, will mature in 90 to 105 days within the right growing conditions. This will also depend on the gourds' origination. Did it come from the Southwest, or the Northeast, or Overseas?

When actually picking your gourds the stems left on the gourd usually works best. Stems tend to make them a better 'keeper'. Plus, it adds a little character. Try to cut the stem from the vine with a sharp cutter. An 'anvil pruner' works very good to make a quick clean cut. About half the distance between the vine and the gourd, is usually a good medium place to cut. Chances are, if the stem 'bleeds' after it has been cut, possibly it's not fully mature. Some of these will still mature, while others won't. If a gourd shrivels and rots, more than likely, it was not mature when picked.

The gourds nearest the start of the plant are usually the first to mature. The colors will change as it becomes mature. The ornamentals color will become deeper and more vivid. Most of the hard shells will become lighter in color and some will tend to have blotches of grayish/white in them as they mature. While a few of the hardshells do just the opposite, and turn a deep dark green.

Some of the ornamentals can be cut from the vine while it is still green and producing blossoms yet. For most of the hard shells, it is suggested that you wait until the vine dies of maturity (turns brown), or the frost kills it, before you pick it. A light frost usually will not damage the gourds. A harder frost will leave like a 'bruise' mark on them, usually a permanent mark on the shell of the gourd.

Frosts may bruise them, but, if left out in a Midwest Winter, may be very beneficial. The freezing winter weather will help make the shell very durable. The skin usually scrapes off easier, the color will normally be more evenly and of a darker tan color. However, this has a tendency to ruin the seeds for planting, if they are not dry before freezing. Allowing the gourds to hang on the arbor or overwinter laying on a wire frame table, allowing them plenty of air, usually works quite well. This will work equally as well on

both ornamentals and hardshells. Ornamental stems become very fragile as they mature and dry. These may want to fall off the vine. Try to keep them off the ground, especially in a wet Winter.

If kept from freezing temperature, gourds will usually produce mold as they dry out. A solution of 1 part of bleach and 10 parts of room temperature water - can be used to wipe off the mold as it appears. Most gourds will dry better if laying on their sides or such that air can get to the blossom end of the gourd.

It is recommended by many, that gourds be fully dried before cutting into them or opening them up. However, some folks do work with them while they are green.

The uniqueness of gourds has very many options. I believe this is why so many people are intrigued with them like they are. Hope your harvest is successful. GOURD LUCK