

How Do I Dry Gourds?

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This is a question that is asked a lot. Which in turn causes another question to be asked - What do you want to do with them? Or what do you want them to look like when they are dried? First of all, you need to be sure you have fully mature gourds. A fully mature gourd has been allowed to grow the entire required season. It should be real firm and solid. Give it a pressure test, try to squeeze **it** with your thumb and fingers. A mature gourd should not allow any depression. Gourds are 95% to 99% water when harvested. Remember - In working with gourds, very seldom is there methods that work 100% every time. However, some methods do work extremely better than others. In some cases, methods with good results may be as low as 50%, such as in green-scraping, a method referred to as "trying to fool Mother Nature".

The finish product - "the dried gourd"- The seeds will normally rattle inside the gourd when the gourd is pounded against the heel of your palm. However, the seeds will not always rattle inside the gourd when they are dry. The dried gourd that you desire makes a difference as to how you want to dry it. Do you want a dark colored gourd with mottling effects? Do you just want a dark colored gourd? Or, do you want a light colored gourd with little or no mottling effects? Mottling effects are created by mold growing on the gourd as it dries. Some folks think that when the mold appears it is getting rotten and want to throw it out. NOT TRUE - the mold is the natural drying process that takes place in a warm environment as the moisture leaves the gourd. Only if the gourd shrivels and wrinkles and becomes mushy it is in the rotting process, and this is usually because of an immature gourd.

To achieve a dark colored gourd with mottling effects, simply bring it in out of the weather where it won't freeze. Set it where the air can circulate around it as much as possible. Some folks will use a wire mesh fastened to a frame work, or refrigerator racks setting up on saw horses or such, so that air can get under it as well as around it. Some folks will hang them in a mesh sack such as an onion or potato sack. Rotate them, or shake them around if in a mesh sack, at least once a week or in some instances more often. Some of the Lagenarias, commonly known as hardshells, will have a tendency to lighten in color as they begin to dry, sometimes to almost a grayish color.. As the gourd begins to dry out, mold will appear. This can be left in place to acquire the largest amount of mottling effects possible or, can be wiped off with a soapy water solution and rinsed off with tap water and dried with a towel.

Some folks will use a bleach solution made of 1 part bleach and 10 parts water-instead of soapy water to help kill the mold. NOTE - Do not use hot water with bleach. This bleach mixture can be stored in a jug and used as needed, shake well before using. If you should choose to leave the mold on the gourd until the gourd is completely dried out, in order to gain all the mottling effects possible, the gourd should then be submerged in a tub of warm water, soapy water, or the bleach mixture solution, and scrubbed with a stiff brush or a scouring pad to help remove the mold and the skin. The skin must be removed before crafting can begin. Sometimes a paring knife, a pocket knife, or a large dull knife may be needed to scrape stubborn skin off Try to scrape the gourd in a vertical pattern (from stem to blossom end).

This usually works faster and is more efficient, and less apt to gouge the gourd or leave scraping marks. The skin will normally come off a wet dried gourd easier than a illy dried gourd. This is why it is recommended to soak in a tub of water. Some folks will take gourds outside and allow them to sit in the rain to help loosen the skin. Even though the mold is wiped off periodically, you will probably still have mottling effects. These will make some real attractive designs. This helps enhance the appearance on gourd dishes, dippers, birdhouses, and other varieties of gourd works. Also by using this method of bringing them in out of the weather and not allowing them to freeze, the seeds can be removed when cut open and can be planted later.

Remember – when saving seeds, if the gourds you are working with wasn't grown in isolation or hand pollinated (which most of them aren't), the seeds will be cross-pollinated with the other varieties of gourds they were grown around and your seeds will be a mixture of these varieties. However, these cross-pollinated gourd seeds can produce some real interesting looking gourds, especially for craft work. The finish color of a dried gourd is also determined on how much sunlight is available during the drying process. If the gourds are kept in a dark basement, usually their color will be darker. Using this drying process, gourds will take anywhere from 1 month to 6 months or more to dry. Larger gourds require more time than smaller ones generally.

To achieve a dark colored gourd with little or no mottling effects you can leave the gourds outside and let them freeze. Most of the time, these will not mold under these conditions. Again, these must be fully mature gourds to get good results. Set the gourds upon a trellis, hang in mesh bags, or spread out on wire racks or such to allow for air circulation around them. Allowing them to freeze dry will have a tendency to make the shells more durable, especially with the ornamentals. The skin will become flaky toward the end of the drying process and can usually be removed fairly easy soaking them in warm water and using a scrub brush or scouring pad. Normally it takes until Spring time before the gourds are dry enough to work with. In this freezing process, the embryo inside the seeds will usually be ruined and the seeds will not germinate. The seeds may still be of a good enough quality to make necklaces and used for other gourd craft work.

To achieve a light colored gourd with little or no mottling effects this requires a lot different drying process known as "green-scraping". Using this method you are "trying to fool Mother Nature" by hurrying up the drying process. Scrape the gourds in a vertical pattern with a knife when the gourd is still green. Ornamentals with all their colors are still considered to be green. A fully mature gourd is most important in this process. Some folks will wait till they see that first speck of mold before they begin to scrape green gourds, noting that it is starting to dry. Scrape the green skin with a paring knife or with large gourds a heavy duty utensil may be needed such as an edge of a putty knife or a dull fishermen's fillet knife. Try to use an edge that is not real sharp to help avoid gouging and digging into the shell. After scraping all the skin off, scrub under water with a scouring pad to help remove small particles of skin still on the gourd, wash with soapy water, rinse with tap water and dry with a towel.

Now, to help get the real light tan finished color of the shell, set the scraped green gourd outside in bright sunlight preferably on a breezy day, providing it's above freezing and there isn't a wind chill factor below freezing. The most desirable temperatures would be 550 to 800. Rotate these very often to get consistent drying results. With the small gourds rotate as often as every 2 hours, and with the larger ones rotate them

a couple times a day. Bring them inside before any dew sets in and/or before it rains. Keep the gourds as dry as possible. The bright sunlight will make the gourds a lighter color. The breeze will help them dry out quicker. Wipe any mold off that appears with the bleach solution, rinse, and dry. Put these gourds outside as much as feasibly possible. If unable to set outside, try and set them inside on paper or cardboard in the sunlight and rotate them often. Some folks set them near heat to help speed up the drying process. The drying process inside may take longer than outside because of the lack of a breezy wind to help dry them out. However, a fan can be used to substitute for this. The method of green-scraping at times may cause the gourds to shrivel and collapse, because of the speedy drying process. After the gourd is completely dry, it can be cut and the seeds removed if so desired. The seeds should be of good quality and should be able to be planted. Using this drying process gourds have been known to dry as quickly as 2 weeks with the smaller ones, and about 6 weeks with some of the larger ones.

There are other methods of drying also. Some folks will drill or cut holes in them when they are green to aid in the drying process. This can invite pests and diseases inside the gourd and ruin the seeds and possibly ruin the gourd too. Other folks have set them immediately beside a heat source such as a heat register or wood stove to help speed up the drying process. I have heard of other processes too, such as setting them in freezers and even boiling them. I have not had any experience with any of these methods.

The methods I have gone into detail about are the ones I'm familiar with and am willing to share with you, (marked #). These are not the only drying methods that work to achieve the finished product "the dried gourd", but these are the ones I have experienced, and I hope this helps some of you. These methods will work for both the ornamentals and the hardshells. Try some experimenting of your own. Gourds are a lot of fun and you have numerous variables you can work with. Give gourds a try and happy gourdening !