Gourds Are Only As Hard As You Make Them

By Cindy Abate, Master Gardener, Vance County

There are many types of gourds but this article is about Hard-shell gourds. Hard-shell gourds mature in 110-130 days. However, this is just the maturing stage of the gourd, itself; it does not include the time that is needed for the gourd to harden, which we will discuss later.

Planting gourds can be done either by direct seeding, when the soil warms up from late April through mid June, or they can be started inside. If started inside, be careful they are given enough space for the large root system and that they do not rot. Pay careful attention to the directions on the seed packet.

Whether you are planting inside or outside, start the preparation of your soil by checking on the pH first. Gourds do best between 5.8-6.2 pH. In the red clay of North Carolina, making a raised bed with compost and good light topsoil will produce the best result. Planting directly into the clay will produce small, possibly malformed gourds. Gourds do not do well with weeds nor do they do particularly well with drought.

The next step in preparation (which is something you can do any time after planting but before the vines become too large) is to create a trellis for your gourd vines. Training your gourds on a trellis is not necessary but the gourds will be cleaner and it will be easier to watch for disease and insect damage.

There are many types of trellis that can be used, from the simple tomato cage to sturdy posts with heavy twine or even lattice, which is commonly used around the base of a house. The lattice works very nicely whether upright or bent over wood so the vines climb over it like a bridge. Whatever type of trellis you decide on, be sure that it is sturdy because the more gourds the vine produces, the more weight will be put on the trellis.

Once your gourd seedlings have emerged you may want to put down mulch such as straw or black fabric. This will help keep the soil moist and makes it easier to spot insects and diseases. Turning the gourds occasionally is beneficial because you can see diseases or insects and the gourd will not develop flat spots.

As for fertilizers, any good 10-10-10 can be used at planting time or a good natural fertilizer is grass clippings. The clippings need to be deep, about 3 inches, and refurbished during the season as the worms and insects will break it down over a period of time. Remember, gourds do not like weeds so use the best way you can find to keep weeds at bay.

You’ll know that your gourds are almost ready for harvesting when the vines begin to turn brown and become brittle. You can leave the gourds on the vines over the winter to finish hardening, or you can remove them and put them in a cool, dry place. If you hang them by the vine or a rope tied around the vine, you will keep the gourd from getting flat spots. They also dry better if separated from each other and not thrown into a pile.

The gourds should be dry and hard by spring. If you pick them up, shake them and hear the seeds rattle inside, the gourds are ready for whatever you have in mind for them. Decorative painting can be done with or without cutting and emptying the gourds. But water scoops, birdhouses or baskets require cutting and emptying the gourds. There are a wide variety of books available or the Internet can give you wonderful suggestions of ways to use your hardened gourds. This is the fun part!

Bibl: The Gourd Reserve
North Carolina State University; Horticulture Dept.
Picture: Cindy Abate
Good website:
http://marthasgourds.com/gourdinfo/growinggourds.php
http://www.amishgourds.com/
HERB OF THE MONTH
By Edna Lovelace Gaston, Master Gardener, Caswell County

*Mentha spp.*

**Height:** 2 ft.
**Flowers:** July & August, tiny, usually purple, pink or white
**Propagation:** seeds (slow), cuttings, division, layering
**Growing conditions:** partial sun to shade, will tolerate moist areas - it can be grown inside provided the container is placed in a sunny window and kept very moist
**Cultivation:** cutting improves the vigor, do not let seed heads form or the plant will die, keep well-watered, needs little fertilizer, divide every three years or so, discarding the less vigorous areas
**Uses:** garnishes, teas, mint juleps, breath freshener, companion plant (repel aphids and many other pests), many others uses
**Notes:** to contain the plant and it runners, grow in a pot or put a barrier in the ground 6-8 inches deep.

**History:** Once upon a time the god Persephone discovered that Pluto and Minthe were in love. In his rage, he transformed the beautiful nymph into a lowly plant. While Pluto could not reversed the spell, he decided that this plant would have a wonderful smell whenever stepped upon.

Now don’t get upset when I say that this is one of my favorite herbs. Just rub your hand across the leaves on a hot day and you cannot help but feel cooler! If you have a problem with ants in your kitchen, just put a few springs on the counter and tomorrow they will be gone!

While run-away mints can be a nuisance, a nicely contained plant is a joy. It is perfect as a “spiller” in a container or alone in a hanging basket. There are many varieties: currently I am growing applemint, peppermint, spearmint, orange mint and my personal favorite, chocolate mint whose leaves taste like a peppermint patty! While all are in the same family, each is a little different and special in its own way.

In the kitchen, mints can be used in everything from appetizers to desserts. In medieval times, it was used as an antiseptic and a strewing herb to improve the scent in castles. Give this herb a chance – it’s hardy, relatively pest free, has a wonderful scent!

**Additional Information:**

Picture: Edna Lovelace Gaston

SEPTEMBER TO DO!
Fruits and Veggies
By Carl Shafer, Master Gardener, Vance County

- The week of September 1 is the recommended time to spray for peachtree borers. Spray the trunk and major branches with permethrin. Follow label instructions. Peachtree borers may also attack apricot, cherry, nectarine, and plum trees.
- Prune out fire blight killed wood from apples, pears, and pyracantha if you have not already done so. Be sure to check crab apples and Bradford pears. If you wait until winter it will be more difficult to determine the dead wood.
- Continue to remove spent crops and plant cool weather fall crops, cover crops or cover the bare ground with a layer of mulch that can be tilled under in the spring. It is too late for beans, cucumbers, and squash unless you use robust frost protection (ie row covers with tunnels or hoop houses.). You can try cool weather cole plants, but they should have been set out in late July or August. Cool weather seeded crops include: kale, lettuce, mustard, onions, radishes, spinach, and turnips. See the last issue, August 09, for more details and web links.
- Carefully monitor your fall crops for insects. Use appropriate insecticides. BT products work well for caterpillars on cole crops.
- In the latter part of the month, clip new blossoms off tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants so that the last fruits will mature.
- Late fall or early winter is the best time to plant trees and shrubs. If you are planning to start or expand tree and nut plantings, you should check local plant nurseries and/or online/mail order sources to have plants on hand when needed. Small fruits are usually planted in the spring.
SEPTEMBER TO DO!
Landscaping & Lawn Care
By Onda Marable, Master Gardener, Vance County

- Use September to enjoy the outdoors and all your work this summer, as the weather begins to cool off.
- Mark the location of all of your perennials and biennials.
- Divide spring-blooming perennials such as phlox, coreopsis, black-eyed susans, & coneflower.
- Set out pansies, snapdragons, dianthus, calendula, nasturtium & English daisy.
- Add 4 -6 inches of mulch to your azalea & camellia plants.
- Soil test the lawn area. Based on the results, apply a low-nitrogen or slow-release fertilizer and lime.
- **DO NOT** fertilize or prune shrubs or trees NOW!!

INTERESTING TIDBITS
By Marty Finkel, Master Gardener, Granville County

A couple of rare trees to look for, as reported in the Vol. 41, No. 10 Aug. ’09 issue of “The Avant Gardener,” are the hybrid horsechestnut, *Aesculus x woerlitzensis ellwangeri*, which grows to about 20’, has shiny green leaves and deep red spring flowers. Those of us who went to the Keith Arboretum for the May field trip were impressed by their beautiful flowering horsechestnuts. I do not know if any of the horsechestnuts were this species. The other tree is the Chinese pearlbloom, *Poliothyrsis sinensis*, growing 15’ to 20’ tall with panicles of white-turning-yellow flowers in midsummer. I looked it up in Dirr, and he says it is not common. “Large, white, 6” to 8” long fragrant panicles were dripping from the ends of the shoots” and the trees were in full sun when he saw them in late July 1991 at the Arnold Arboretum. At that time, they had persisted through an extended drought. The pearlbloom tree can be seen at Duke Gardens and at the JCRA.

From the same source comes the news that a single application of the growth regulator BA (benzyladenine) will increase the number of flower spikes, branching of spikes, and the number of flowers on each spike of *Phalenopsis*, or moth orchids.

A great way to preserve an insect or spider that you want to transport to someone for identification is to put it in a container with a dollop of regular hand sanitizer from your local drugstore or supermarket. “…..Over the course of a year, adult specimens remained ‘lifelike’ when immersed in the sanitizers, though some immature specimens became dark and/or slightly distorted.” From the “Growing Tips” column in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens “Plants and Garden News” Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 2005/Winter 2006.

The new Education Center at the NC Botanical Garden should be a DESTINATION visit, since it is the first public building and the first state-owned building in NC to receive the highest level of certification for green architecture: a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum building. It is having a “soft opening” in September, according to a press release, so be sure to see it. Always worthwhile and inspiring is the annual Sculpture in the Garden exhibition at the NCBG, this year from Sept. 12 through Nov. 15.

**Sept. 8** (Tues.) Plantsmen’s Tour led by Mark Weathington, Assistant Director, JCRA “Roses and Relatives” from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., free to members, at the JCRA

**Date to remember:** **Sat. Sept. 12** Granville Gardeners Annual Plant Sale, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Agriculture Extension Building at the corner of Spring and Wall Streets, Oxford. Part of the proceeds go for a $500 scholarship to a student in Horticulture at NCSU. You can double your plant acquisitions by attending the NCBG plant sale (all native southeastern
plants), 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. this same day if you have some money left over.

Sept. 19 (Sat.) Pi Alpha Xi Plant sale at the JCRA 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. and Sept. 20 (Sun.) 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Sept. 26, (Sat); 9 am-2 pm, Duke Gardens Plant and Craft Festival, Web site is www.sarahpdukegardens.net

ROSE TIPS FOR THE MONTH
By Heidi Moore, Master Gardener, Warren County

Maintenance is the key to keeping your roses healthy and disease free for the upcoming fall season. Your plants will continue to do well with weekly applications of fungicides to control black spot and powdery mildew. If your area has not received sufficient rainfall to keep your plants well hydrated, provide enough water to equal at least 1 ½ inches each week. Plants that are stressed are more likely to be attacked by disease and insects. Continue to deadhead any spent blossoms and be sure to clean up debris that has fallen around your roses.

If any of your roses need to be transplanted or severely pruned, wait until February. We are very late in the growing season, and your plants will not have sufficient time to recover before a change in weather will leave them open to disease and shallow root growth. Mark the spot for transplanting and begin to prepare the soil for the bush or bushes. If you loosen the soil, remove any annuals, grass or weeds and have your soil tested to know what needs to be added to make it a good rose bush growing medium, you will be prepared when transplanting time arrives. Always consider the amount of sun your roses will receive when choosing a location as roses require a minimum of 6 hours of direct continuous sun each day. Good drainage is also an important consideration.

PLANT OF THE MONTH
By Marty Finkel, Master Gardener, Granville County

Hardy Gloxinia ‘Evita’
(Seemannia nematanthodes ‘Evita’)

What a red-hot beauty this perennial is! This native of Argentina just happens to be hardy in zone 7b, so we can grow it outside. Introduced to the trade by Plant Delights Nursery, this compact 1’ tall by 4’ wide groundcover has soft green foliage which is topped, starting in August, with 1” long bells of pure orange-red. Grow it in part-sun to light shade, in well-drained average soil and it will bloom until frost. Mark it well as it is late to emerge, usually appearing in June. The plant slowly spreads by above-ground stolons.

Hardy Gloxinia pictures: J.C. Raulston Arboretum

Recommendations for the use of chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by NC State University, NC A&T State University or NC Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage regulations and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact an agent of NC Cooperative Extension.