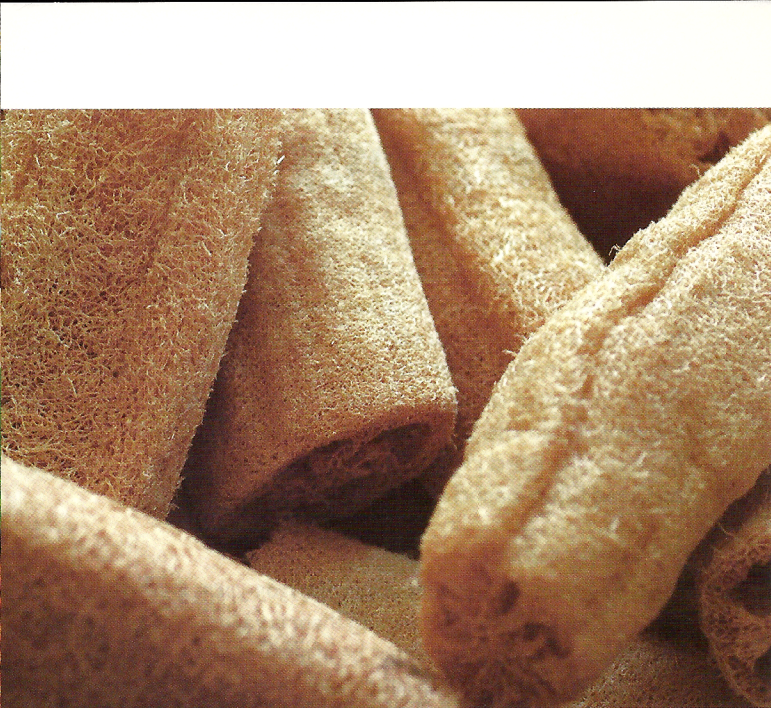


# Curious Gourd

This vegetable-cum-sponge comes from the back of the yard, not the depths of the sea. With the help of an award-winning grower, we show you how it's done. *By Jan O'Daniel*

A LUFFA PLANT

THINKSTOCK



**LEFT:**  
The luffa flower

**ABOVE:**  
Dried luffas

seeds. For what, they didn't know, but Ackerman grew the one the Army liked best. Hence, the name "Best Luffa."

### Blue Ribbon Secrets

"I talk to a lot of people who get the vine but no luffa," says Brickner. "I tell them they have to fool

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ighty-one-year-old Norm Brickner of Bascom saw it made into a tiny '32 Ford hot rod. The U.S. Navy reportedly used it as a filter for ship engines during World War II. Most people, however, have only seen it hanging out in the bath aisle of the mega mart or in their own shower.

"It" is the luffa (loofah) sponge. Surprisingly, luffa is not from the sea, but from the garden.

Luffa is a gourd — specifically, a tropical plant from the Cucurbitaceae (cucumber) family that grows well in Ohio despite the climate. An annual plant with cylindrical, thin-skinned fruit, luffa usually is dried, cleaned and used as a scrubber for skin, dishes or tires.

Brickner, a former vice president of the Ohio Gourd Society, judge for the American Gourd Society and a blue-ribbon grower, first became interested in gourds in 1985. He and friend Kern Ackerman were asked by the then-president of the Ohio Gourd Society if they would true up the hard show gourds.

"The artists couldn't get true gourd seed," Brickner says, "so we said, 'Sure, we'll do that.' There were some professionals growing luffa for seed. We paid a big price but didn't get anything worthwhile so we did it ourselves."

For years Brickner and Ackerman produced hand-pollinated, true-to-type gourd seeds, including luffa, under the name Rocky Fork Gourds. Five years ago they sold their seeds to North Baltimore's Anna Miller of Quarry Farm Gourds.

Miller still sells one of their varieties, called Best Luffa, so named for an experiment conducted some years back. The Army recruited Ackerman and others to grow a variety of

the plant, because it's tropical."

Brickner says the fooling begins by planting luffa seeds indoors under a grow light about mid-April, a month before the last frost. As the temperature warms, harden the seedlings off by setting them outside 15 minutes one day, an hour the next, three hours the following, then a full day and finally overnight.

Those who don't want to fuss with starting seeds indoors don't have to.

"You can plant luffa directly in the garden," says Miller, "but only when the soil is 80 degrees. Otherwise the seeds won't germinate."

Plant a few feet apart in a sunny spot, adding compost as needed. Mulch with straw to keep moisture in and weeds out, but keep mulch away from the stem to discourage rot.

Though most gardeners won't need or desire to adopt his method, Brickner swears by "the wall of water." Using a dozen clear, plastic tubes, he forms an 18-by-18-inch circle, filling the tubes with water and placing the contraption over the plant like a teepee. The tubes capture the sun's heat and help keep the plant consistently warm. (Look online for pre-made kits and do-it-yourself instructions).

After the cold nights have passed, replace the wall of water with a trellis. Like other gourds, luffa left on the ground can rot and become infested with insects. Watch for bugs and water only as needed. Cucumber beetles can be a problem and should be treated with an insecticide, such as carbaryl.

"The only watering I do is if we don't get an inch of rain a week. Be careful not to get the foliage wet; otherwise you're asking for fungi," says Brickner.

LEFT: WIKIMEDIA/H. ZELL; RIGHT: ISTOCKPHOTO

# Seed Sources

You could try to save and sow your own seeds but, according to Elaine Grassbaugh of The Ohio State University's Department of Horticulture and Crop Science, saving seeds of cucurbits (cucumbers and any type of pumpkins, squash or gourds including luffa) may result in considerable cross-pollination. The result? A cornucopia of fruit of different shapes, sizes and color, none of which may resemble the original. The best luffa yield will likely come from quality seed purchased from a reputable supplier, such as these Ohio-based seed providers.

## FOOTHILLS FARM

11341 Eddyburg Rd., Newark 43055, 877/305-7083. [foothillsfarm.com](http://foothillsfarm.com)

**TYPES:** Open-pollinated (meaning there is variety in shape and size)

Luffa, Miniature Round (may not be available) seeds

**COST:** \$2.50 per pack of 15 seeds, plus shipping and sales tax

## QUARRY FARM GOURDS

12091 Eagleville Rd., North Baltimore 45872, 419/257-2597. [quarryfarmgourds.com](http://quarryfarmgourds.com)

**TYPES:** Hand-pollinated Best Luffa and Miniature Luffa seeds with an 80 percent minimum germination guarantee

**COST:** \$3 per pack of 12 seeds, plus shipping and sales tax

## RUPP SEEDS

17919 County Road B, Wauseon 43567, 800/700-1199. [ruppseeds.com](http://ruppseeds.com)

**TYPE:** Luffa

**COST:** \$6.85 for 1 ounce, plus shipping and sales tax



## Harvesting, Drying and Cleaning

While some gardeners pick the early blooms (they're yellow and look like a small cucumber blossom), Brickner says to leave them alone.

"The only time I might take a blossom off is if I see a deformed gourd," he says, noting that planting mid-May will likely yield blooms by late July.

Most insects and bees do the pollinating, but Brickner isn't above helping things along. Using a cotton swab or painter's brush, he transfers pollen from the male to the female. Male plants have only a blossom, while females have a blossom with a baby gourd behind it. Luffa has a long growing

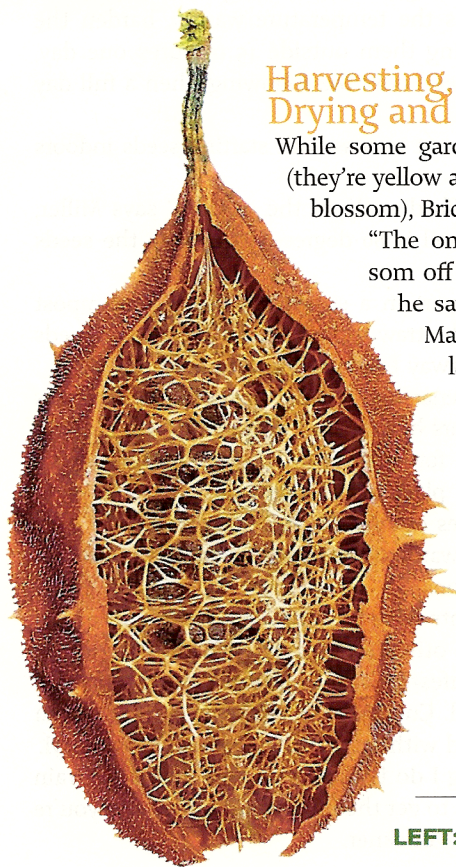
season and is the only gourd harvested after fall frost. When the vine is dead — as early as August and as late as November — cut the fruit from the vine, leaving an inch of stem. To dry, lay the luffa on a piece of old screen in the rafters of a shed or garage, allowing air to circulate.

"Watch the gourds and feel them," says Brickner. "They'll turn brown, and when they're real hard, squeeze and crack them open, then shake the seeds out."

Elaine Grassbaugh, a research associate with The Ohio State University's Department of Horticulture and Crop Science, says to soak the luffa in warm water to soften any remaining skin. To get a creamy-white appearance, put the fibrous insides into a bucket containing one part bleach and nine parts water, then rinse and air dry before using.

With luffa, patience is a virtue. The plant's growing season is the longest of all gourds — about 180 days — and drying can take six weeks or longer.

But the real payoff comes from the look on people's faces when they see what came from the garden. ■



**LEFT:** A dried miniature luffa (*luffa operculata*) reveals the interior portion used to make a sponge.

TOP: WIKIMEDIA; LEFT: WIKIMEDIA/H. ZELL