



LUFFA (LOOFAH) SPONGE GOURDS

Luffa cylindrica

The vines need a VERY sturdy fence or trellis to grow on, they don't work as ground cover, because the gourds will discolor the sponge, rot or be misshapen when in contact with the ground. Soak seeds overnight before planting. Plant about 1/2" - 3/4" deep along a fence or other support in full sun in well drained, slightly acidic, tilled soil that has a bit of compost or fertilizer added. Soil temperature should be at least 73°F and outside **low temperature** should be no lower than 70°F. If your temperatures are not this warm, then you will need to wait until they are or, if your growing season is not long enough to wait, you will need to germinate your seeds in containers with artificial heat and then transplant them outside when temperatures are suitable. These seeds **WILL NOT GERMINATE IF THEY ARE NOT KEPT VERY WARM!** The vine requires a long, hot growing season of about 110 days. If you don't have at least four months of warm weather, sow your luffa seeds indoors to give them a head start. Again, you must provide heat, either from a heat mat or lights (putting your seeds on top of the refrigerator in your home is NOT warm enough). You can plant 5-6 vines together in a 'hill', then space down the fence about 20 feet to plant another 5-6. When your plants are up, thin down to the strongest 3 plants. Don't plant them too thickly or you will reduce your crop – we get more luffa's when they have more space on the fence than when many are crowded together. Once you have vines growing, do not fertilize again unless your plants show signs of lack of nutrients (ie: leaves not deep green) or you will have leaves and few gourds. Water liberally during the growing season when they are producing fruits, stop watering once autumn approaches.



Female Luffa Flower



Gourds produce separate male and female flowers. Male flowers serve as the pollinator and female flowers bear fruit. The female flower can be distinguished by the presence of the immature fruit at its base. Several male flowers are produced before any female flowers, and the male flowers will drop without setting fruit, so don't be concerned if you are getting blooms with no fruit at first. In addition, the male flowers are held above the vine on flower stems while the female flowers are down directly on the vine itself (harder to see if your vines are thick).

In autumn, mature gourds will begin to turn yellow then brown and dry. Check plants frequently and remove any dried gourds. These will be yellow/brown and feel light. The outside skin of the gourd should be loose from the inside sponge; if you can't press the outside skin in and feel it kind of 'crunch' or 'pop', the luffa is not ready yet. If you harvest them too soon, you will not get sponges and most likely not get any seeds, either. On the other hand, if you wait too long (especially in areas where the growing season is long and the weather remains warm), the seeds within the luffa may start sprouting.

After the first killing frost, remaining gourds can be allowed to continue drying in the field or be brought inside to dry in a warm, well-ventilated area. Do not let dried gourds hang in wet weather for any length of time or the sponges will discolor. If gourds are mature when dried, the skins will be easy to remove from the sponges. At this stage, the blossom end cap can be broken off, and a vascular bundle can be pulled up the side of the gourd like a zipper. The sponge will pop out and be very wet and white. Quickly rinse the sponge in water to prevent the plant juices from oxidizing on the sponge and remove the seeds at this time - the easiest method is to dunk the sponges up and down in a bucket of water; the seeds will rinse out the holes in the sponge – then just use a sieve and dip them out of the water. If you're processing a lot of gourds at a time, change the water frequently. Make sure you dry the seeds thoroughly before storing for next year. You may rinse the sponges in a 10% bleach solution to whiten them.

Luffa gourds can be harvested when they are between 4" and 6" long for eating/cooking. They are sweet, tasty vegetables that can be stir-fired, sautéed, breaded and fried or cooked with meats just as you would zucchini squash or okra. It can also be sliced into a salad like cucumber or pickled. Mature seeds can be roasted for a snack and young flowers and foliage can be cooked as a green. Also called Chinese Okra (because of its similar taste and texture to okra), it is low in calories. A 3 ounce serving contains only 20 calories and 20 percent of the RDA for vitamin C.

Days to Maturity: 110

Days to emerge: 10-25

Seed depth: ½" Soak 4-5 hours first for faster germination.

Placement: Full Sun; Average soil

Seedling id: Two rather large oval/elongated leaves on each seedling, much like a squash or cucumber.

When to sow outside: 2-3 weeks after last frost. Soil Temp should be at least 73°F and air LOW temp should be at least 70° F.

Other notes: Since luffa's are in the squash family, it is not recommended that they be planted near other squash or cucumber crops due to the possible cross-pollination. Luffa's will get worms in the fruit, just like squash and cucumbers, and worm holes will discolor the sponge. Luffa's may be treated with insecticides or insecticidal soap as you would these other vegetables, if desired.