How to Determine When to Harvest Pumpkins and Gourds

When I think about fall, beautiful pumpkins and gourds come to mind. A common question is, “How do I determine when to harvest them?”

Pumpkins are ready to harvest when the rind is hard and has good color characteristics typical for the variety. Also watch the vines; fully colored pumpkins on vines which are dying are ready to harvest.

The stem makes the pumpkin more attractive, so use a pair of pruning shears to cut the stem from the vine to avoid breaking it. Do not carry the pumpkin by the stem or it might break off.

If you are keeping pumpkins for jack-o'-lanterns or Thanksgiving decorations, keep them in a cool, dry location on straw, hay, or a slotted shelf to allow good air movement around the pumpkins. Good air circulation will help reduce rotting. Unfortunately, some rotting may occur due to injury or stresses such as drought and/or heat.

The best temperature range for the storage of pumpkins is 55 to 60 degrees F.
Ornamental and hardshell gourds are popular for displays and crafts. Ornamental gourds are very colorful. Two or three colors may be combined together on the same gourd to form different patterns. A variety of shapes and sizes are available and may be warty or smooth.

Many of the hardshell gourds are from the genera *Lagenaria*. These gourds have common names resembling their shape such as bottle, dumbbell, kettle, powder horn, dipper, club, or birdhouse. When these gourds are dry, the shells become very hard and last for a long period of time with reasonable care.

Gourds should be harvested when fully mature with deep, solid color and hard rind, but before frost to reduce possible spoilage. It is best to leave all but very early maturing fruit on the vine until the decorating season is near, the vine is dead, or frost is threatening. Gourds picked green will not color. The gourd is mature when the stem turns brown and dies. Gourds left on living vines will continue to color over a period of three to four weeks if diseases and insects have not affected the fruit.

When harvesting gourds, avoid cuts and bruises which are major entry points for rotting fungi and bacteria. Bruised fruit may discolor and decay. Harvest fruit using sharp shears to cut the stem.

As the gourds dry, the stem sometimes falls off. If it remains attached, it will enhance the gourd’s decorative appearance and market value. Do not handle gourds by the stem.

When first collected, thoroughly wash the gourd in some non-bleaching disinfectant, such as vinegar and water, and wiped dry. If quite dirty, wash in warm, soapy water and rinse in clean water. Dry with a soft cloth.

If you want to use the ornamental gourds for decorations, put them in a warm, dry place with good air circulation inside the house or garage for about a week. Then leave them natural or
polish them with floor wax to enhance the colors. Shellac and varnish can also be used, but the glossy appearance is unnatural. Check the gourds often to make sure they are not rotting. These gourds probably will only last for the fall.

The ideal curing or drying conditions for hardshell gourds used for crafts is 80 to 85 degrees F with relative humidity of 80 to 85 percent for seven to ten days. Otherwise they can be cured in a warm, dry, dark place. Warmth encourages drying and darkness prevents color fading. It may take several months for gourds to dry, especially the large hardshell types. Do not make a hole in gourds to help them dry because rotting fungi and bacteria enter the hole and may cause the fruit to rot. Gourds should not be stored in a damp basement, a closed heated room, or in tight, unventilated containers.

During the curing or drying process, gourds can be placed in open fruit crates, spread on slotted shelves, or placed in mesh onion bags and hung where ventilation and air circulation can be maintained. The use of artificial heat without ventilation has a tendency to cause molding and spoilage. If hardshell gourds mold but are not rotten, you can still keep them; some consider mold appealing for craft work.

When you can shake the hardshell gourd and hear seeds rattling, it is cured and ready to use for crafts. It may take them many months to dry.

Cured gourds can be kept until the next season by storing them at 50 to 60 degrees F with a relative humidity of 70 to 75 percent.

Enjoy decorating with pumpkins and gourds! For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service office at 270-685-8480.

Annette’s Tip:
The rule of thumb for dividing perennials now is to complete the division process by October 1. This will give the plants time to establish a good root system after they are planted again; otherwise they may heave or be pushed out of the ground when the soil freezes and thaws this winter which may cause them to die.

**Upcoming Events:**

There’s still time to sign up for the Extension Master Gardener class which will meet at the Daviess County Extension Office every Thursday from 9:00 a.m. – noon beginning September 7. Registration is required by August 22.

“Back to School for Lawn Care” will be held Saturday, August 26 at 10:00 a.m. at the Daviess County Extension Office.

For more information on either program, please call 270-625-8480.

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