



Dried luffa



Luffa flower

## ASK A MASTER GARDENER

# GROWING LUFFA



**Chris Rusch**  
Master Gardener

**Question:** My friend insists that the luffa sponge originates from plants. I always thought they were the remains of an oceanic creature. What's the scoop?

**Answer:** It's easy to assume that a luffa, also spelled loofah, is a sea sponge – however, it's actually a gourd that you can grow in your backyard and process at home.

Luffa is an annual vegetable in the Cucurbitaceae or gourd family. Its distant cousins include watermelons, cucumbers, melons and the hard-shelled gourds. There are two species of cultivated luffa gourds: angled luffa (*Luffa acutangula*) and smooth luffa (*Luffa aegyptica*). Both are a lush plant with large leaves, buttery yellow flowers and fruits that look like giant, 2-foot long cucumbers. The young, edible fruits – which taste like a cross between a cucumber and a zucchini – can be harvested when only a few inches long for stir-fries, chutneys and soups.

When left to mature and dry on the vine, the fruit becomes quite large and the edible flesh transforms into a fibrous woven skeleton with brown skin and rattling seeds. The fully developed fruit is the source of the luffa scrubbing sponge which is used in bathrooms and kitchens.

Luffas are an old-world plant that has been used and cultivated since ancient times. It is believed to have originated in Asia and Africa. The Egyptians grew these gourds for food and also used the fibrous skeleton to make shoes and sandals. The vegetable is popular in Japan, India, China, Bangladesh and Vietnam. The luffa is believed to have traveled to America about 10,000 years ago. Because luffa gourds are left to



Luffa fruit

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIXABAY

mature and dry on the vine, they need a long growing season.

In our area, this can only be achieved by starting luffa seeds indoors six to eight weeks before the average last spring frost. In the Umpqua Valley, it's best to start your seeds in early March in a greenhouse. Before transplanting, spend about a week slowly hardening off your seedlings. Transplant your luffa starts no sooner than mid-May, when all danger of frost has passed.

Luffa gourds require a well-drained soil in a location where they will have

full sun and good air circulation. A good organic soil with plenty of humus and well-rotted manure is ideal. Space your seedlings about 3 to 4 feet apart, and make sure they receive an inch or two of water per week.

Mulch your luffa plants with 2 or 3 inches of straw, which makes weeding between the vines easier and helps the plants retain moisture.

Luffa flowers, leaves and small green fruits can be picked and eaten. The young fruits resemble summer squash in flavor. The Japanese slice the young fruits and

dry them in the sun like apples.

Trellises are particularly important when growing luffa for sponges because they help ensure straight fruits, which are easier to peel and create more attractive and uniform sponges. Since the luffa vines and flowers are so attractive, gardeners should consider growing the beautiful vines on a trellis along a fence, one side of the house or near a porch to provide shade.

When are luffa gourds ready to harvest for sponges? Let the fruits mature on the vine. They're ready to pick when the skin has turned from green to brown or yellowish-brown and the gourd itself feels light when lifted in your hand. Let them dry for about 1-2 weeks. Cut off the ends of your gourd and shake out the black seeds, saving these for next year or for sharing. Soak the gourd in fresh water and gently peel off the outer skin. The inner fibrous skeleton is what you want to use as your "sponge." Some people soak their sponges in a mild bleach solution to whiten them but this is not necessary. It is a matter of personal preference.

Luffa is the perfect addition to your garden space. They are usable plants; edible, compostable and pollinators love their bright yellow flowers. They are also easy to grow if you give them plenty of sunshine, water and a place to climb.

You can enjoy luffa sponges in place of a washcloth, or use them to scrub dishes, scour surfaces, clean your car, add an exfoliating layer to homemade soaps, make a back scratcher or to apply textured patterns to a freshly painted wall. Gardeners can also use luffa fibers in water to hold a rooting plant, or mix them into potting soil as a sustainable peat moss replacement. There are a number of fun and creative ways to use luffa, and because it's such a productive plant you'll have many sponges left to give as gifts.

*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*