

Luffa

The Wonder Gourd of the Orient

It is from the Luffa Gourd that the remarkable vegetable sponges are made. Used in health spas for the rejuvenating effect on skin or as a dish cloth. Produce your own quality durable health aid.

The luffa belongs to a large family of plants which includes gourds, squashes, pumpkins, cucumbers and melons. Luffas are most closely related to cucumbers but only as distant cousins.

Luffas are vigorous growing vines like cucumbers, producing attractive yellow flowers on plants that are admired for their beauty. The fruit which produces the sponge is green, smooth and look likes a cucumber reaching 12" to 18" in length. As many as 25 fruits may grow on a single vine, each weighing 3 to 5 pounds.

The remarkable feature of the Luffa, and one which gives it economic importance is that it has a net-like, fibrous skeleton. Strands of this inner fiber is a continuous structure like a woven fabric. When the Luffa Sponge is moistened it is soft and pliable, but at the same time a regular demon for removing dirt. The sponge can be quickly rinsed clean and can be used over and over again.

Luffa sponges, more than any other type of sponge, has the most extensive internal surface which enables it to hold a considerable amount of water. Luffa is versatile-they can be used for washing delicate glasses, dishes, narrow mouth jars and on the most sensitive skin. Yet these sponges are tough enough that the Navy used them for years to rub down painted surfaces.

How to Grow Luffa

Luffa Gourds are cold sensitive and the seed should be sown only after the ground is thoroughly warm in spring. Be patient if the seeds are slow to sprout, that is a characteristic of Luffas. Luffa grows best in a sunny location in rich soil well supplied with well rotted manure or enriched with a generous application of a balanced garden fertilizer.

Once the Luffa is well established, top dress with a rich, rotted compost or garden fertilizer for better growth and production. Plant 3 to 4 seeds per hill, 1" deep, hills spaced 4 to 6 feet apart. If you garden in a short season area, start the seed indoors 4 to 6 weeks before the last frost in spring. Sow seed directly into pots filled with a sterile potting mix. Maintain a constant soil temperature of 75° to 85°. If the soil temperature fluctuates below 75° the seed may germinate poorly.

Transplant outdoors when the soil temperature reaches which in the Pacific Northwest is usually Memorial Day weekend or after. If planted out early when soil temperature is too cool,

the plants tend to be stunted thus more susceptible to disease and insect attack. Maintain constant soil temperature and moisture until plants become well established. Then reduce watering slightly but still water at a moderate rate. When fruits set, water heavily until 1 to 2 weeks before the first frost.

For productivity best results in obtaining superior quality Luffa, the plants should be trained to grow on a trellis or wire fence so the fruit does not touch the soil.

Luffa needs ample moisture during their growing period. This is done by deep watering so that it penetrates and irrigates the whole root system. Extra growth can be gained by giving individual plants a liquid feeding of fish emulsion or a soluble fertilizer. Better quality Luffa can be grown by removing all the first flowers that appear on the plants, and also removing fruit that is poorly shaped or shows sign of disease. Generally speaking, cultivation of Luffa is similar to growing cucumbers.

Harvesting the Luffa To get the best, high quality vegetable sponge, Luffa should be allowed to ripen on the vine and harvested when the skin has turned yellow.

How to Prepare Luffa for Sponges Place ripened fruit in buckets or tanks of water for a few days until the outer wall goes to pieces and starts to disintegrate which then can be easily removed. Refresh the water once a day to keep the sponges a lighter color. Also remove seeds at this time. Any small amount of non-fibrous material still clinging to the sponge is removed by further wetting. The cleaned sponges are then exposed to the sun and air until they are dried and bleached. A water solution of hydrogen peroxide is sometimes used to bleach the sponges to get the lightest, most appealing color.

As bath sponges they have been widely popular in the British Isles for a long time because of the mild glow they produce on the skin. This blood circulation the sponges induce on the skin has been credited as a relief for arthritic sufferers. Because the Luffa has such a compact network of close fibers, its resiliency makes it useful for many purposes like filters and scrubbing sponges; good for scrubbing vegetables like carrots which then can be eaten without peeling, retaining the nutrients in the skins.

The versatility of the luffa goes beyond producing sponges. The young fruit, when they are still small, are delicious used like okra in soups and stews. They are also cooked like summer squash in Japan, the young fruit is cut and then dried in the sun like apples and apricots and stored for later use.



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