



This gourd hat took a second prize for Ruth Sweitzer at a Gourd Society Show.

Out Of Your Gourd

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DOVER (York Co.) — With the advent of the planting season, gardeners are tuning their tillers, honing their hoe blades, and sowing onions, carrots and peas.

In the spirit of trial and adventure, many gardeners sample new variety introductions and perhaps a new species or two each season. It was this quest for something a little different that started York County gardener Ruth Sweitzer off into her gourd venture.

Ruth Sweitzer, Admire Road, was reading a Burpee seed catalog in bed one January night 18 years ago when she ran across the firm's introduction of "lagenaria" gourd seed. Lagenaria are not the small, colorful, ornamental gourds popular for fall decorating, but large gourds historically used by cultures around the world to make all sorts of practical storage containers.

"I am absolutely fascinated with these gourds," says the Dover gardener now often referred to locally as "The Gourd Lady." Gourds have become a focal point of Ruth Sweitzer's life, filling not only her garden and her house but a large part of her time as well.

"After growing them, giving them away, for three or four years....well, the Lord guides you if you listen," Ruth believes. "I heard a television show one day that featured two women from Cleveland, Georgia, who were doing things with gourds."

Ruth Sweitzer, shortly thereafter, drove south to Cleveland, Georgia, and located the two gourd enthusiasts. Their knowledge, encouragement, suggestions for growing and creative use of gourds further propelled her interest and skills. She picked up tips on small, specialized tools for working with gourds, including the use of keyhole saws for cutting and carving the hard shells of the lagenaria species.

Now, one can glance in any direction in Ruth Sweitzer's tastefully decorated Dover farmhouse and see a gourd — or more likely, several gourds.

"You can make anything from a gourd," says Ruth matter-of-factly. A tour of her cozy home confirms it.

For starter ideas, nearly every window boasts a hanging plant — in a hanging gourd planter. Attractive



Ruth displays one of her many hanging planters styled from gourds. Someday, she would like to open a gourd museum.

dried arrangements incorporate unusually-shaped gourds as both base container and a major part of the design line. Large bushel gourds fashioned into bowls and baskets serve as both ornamentals and holders of everything from magazines to Easter decorations.

One of the most dramatic and useful creations is a full-length wired and working floor lamp, created from a long, straight-necked dipper gourd. Even the cat has a house carved from — what else? — a bushel gourd.

Songbirds around the Sweitzer farm also benefit from gourd birdfeeders and a favorite creation of Ruth's, wren houses.

Ruth fashions wren houses from both birdhouse gourds and dipper gourds grown on the ground. By allowing some dipper gourds to grow on the ground, rather than on an arbor or trellis, the long necks curl and curve around the small gourd body, providing perfect perching spots — sort of porches — for wrens using the houses.

Sanding gourds creates a very fine dust which can cause health irritations to some hobbyists if inhaled over long periods of time. In her basement workshop, between piles of cured gourds for future projects, Ruth has installed an air-cleaning system which she activates while sanding or spray-sealing.

Adjacent to her workshop is a deep tub where she can soak and scrub cured gourds for her numerous craft uses and shows. Ruth frequently presents demonstrations and programs on gourds and gourd crafts and recently taught her first class.

For many years, Ruth grew as much as two acres of large gourds, later reducing her plantings as her supply of gourds on hand increased. Among the many types she cultivates are giant bushel gourds and smaller, slightly flattened round gourds, dipper gourds, birdhouse gourds, even caveman gourds. This last is a club-shaped, slightly elongated type gourd covered with wart-like protrusions.

Much of Ruth's extensive



Gourds keep Ruth Sweitzer much too busy for a rocking chair. Large ones she grows include the dipper type and a bushel type perfect for designs like a cat house and the basket styled by another gourd enthusiast.



Out of her gourds, Ruth has devised such diverse creations as, from left, a Snoopy mask, arrangement with dipper gourd grown on the ground, sleigh, Santa and kettle gourd. A tobacco gourd, a type used by native Americans for storing tobacco products, at right has been attractively painted.

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knowledge and lore about gourds has been learned through her own experimentation and reading a wealth of printed materials about these "fruits."

Early in her gourd-growing trials, Ruth found that planting commercially-offered gourd seed of certain advertised varieties did not necessarily result in mature fruits of that type. Gourds commonly cross-pollenate; unless the seed purchased is "true," what a gardener thinks is planted and what the end of the season yields may be two entirely different results.

"Bushel and dipper gourds are reliable reproducers," she says of these two mainstay types for her creative uses. "One year, I wanted to grow round gourds and got a shape of gourd called a 'zucca' instead. I threw them away."

Then Ruth adds with a laugh, "Sometime later, I went back and retrieved them after seeing what could be done with them."

These large gourds are a some-

what tropical species and need a long growing season, so Ruth starts seedlings inside in April, planting in peat pots. About a week before Mothers' Day, the seedlings are planted outside. Since the weather is often still variable, she protects the tender seedlings with topped-out plastic jugs or large flower pots turned upside down with the bottoms removed.

"Gourds should be grown in good, fertile soil, with lots of dry manure worked in," Ruth advises. "They shouldn't be grown more than two years in the same place, or diseases will build up in the soil."

"Seedlings should have at least four leaves before they're set outside," is her experience. "For about a month, the plants will just 'sit there'; that's okay, because they're developing the root system. After that, vines will grow quickly."

When the vines are about four yards long, Ruth cuts the ends off, to encourage the development of

side growth. For large bushel gourds, or encouraging larger fruits of nearly any gourd, only one or two fruits per vine should be allowed to grow and mature.

Gourds can be grown on plastic, and Ruth also likes to use a heavy mulch to hold moisture in the soil. For watering during dry spells, a squeegee hose, which puts water right at the plants' roots, is preferable over sprinkler hoses which wet the leaves and vines, encouraging disease growth.

"Pray for a good, hot summer if you want to grow gourds," grins this gardening veteran. Excessive moisture causes mildew and rotting, a real problem during the 1992 growing season. In fact, Ruth notes that last year was not a favorable gourd production year anywhere around the world. The extreme wetness of the summer kept the gourds from developing the thick, strong shells necessary for most uses.

Gourds should be hardening on
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