

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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## **Harvesting Pumpkins and Gourds for Decorations** **By Annette Heisdorffer, PhD** **Extension Agent for Horticulture Education – Daviess County**

September brings thoughts of pumpkins and gourds for fall decorations. How do you determine when they are ready, since some are still growing? How do you handle them to use in decorations?

One way to determine ripeness is to check the rind. When the pumpkin rind is hard and has good color characteristics typical for the variety, it is ready to harvest. In addition, look at the vines; fully colored pumpkins on dying vines are ready to harvest.

The best way to remove the pumpkin from the vine is to cut its stem with pruning shears. The pumpkin's stem makes it more attractive and adds character. Even though it is tempting and handy, don't carry the pumpkin by the stem to avoid breaking it off.

If using the pumpkins for jack-o'-lanterns or Thanksgiving decorations, place 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 stress, such as diseases promoted by wet, humid weather. The best temperature range for storing the pumpkins is 55 to 60 degrees F.

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With the pumpkins, ornamental gourds add color to decorations. Some gourds may have two or three colors combined on the same gourd to form different patterns. In addition, a variety of shapes and sizes are available, and some may be warty or smooth.

To use ornamental gourds for decorations, put them in a warm, dry place with good air circulation inside the house or garage for about a week. 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 will probably only last for the fall.

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

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 develop their true color. A gourd is mature when the stem turns brown and dies. Unmature gourds 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. Use sharp shears to cut them from the stem.

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As the gourds dry, the stem sometimes falls off. An attached stem enhances the gourd's decorative appearance. Do not handle gourds by the stem.

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

The ideal curing or drying conditions for hardshell gourds used for crafts are 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 hardshell types to dry. Do not make a hole in the gourd 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. When you shake the hardshell gourd and hear seeds rattling, it is cured and ready to use.

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 tends to cause molding and spoilage. If hardshell gourds mold but are not rotten, they can be kept. Some consider mold appealing for crafting.

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 the pumpkins and gourds! For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service office at 270-685-8480 or [Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

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## **Annette's Tip:**

The rule of thumb for dividing perennials in late summer to early fall is to complete the division process by October 1. This gives the plants time to establish a good root system after; otherwise, they may heave or push out of the ground when the soil freezes and thaws this winter, causing them to dry out or freeze and die.

Before bringing house plants inside for the winter, check for insects and diseases. Treat the problem as needed. Aphids can be sprayed with insecticidal soap. If needed, on warm days, take the plant back outside to spray it and then bring it back inside before the temperature reaches 50 degrees F.

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