

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Gary F Slanga
“Buffalo Gourd”

I was asked recently about a vining plant growing native here in Central Texas that was producing gourds the size of baseballs but was colored like mini-watermelons. That plant is a member of the Cucurbitaceae or Squash family. Its scientific name is *Cucurbita foetidissima*. Its most common name is buffalo gourd and is native to the southwest. It is also known as wild pumpkin, wild gourd, Missouri gourd, Coyote gourd, or fetid gourd. The last name derived from the fetid odor produced by the leaves when they are crushed.

Buffalo gourd is a fast growing perennial that is very drought tolerant. It sends out long vines from a large underground tuberous root that can be as large as 16 inches in diameter at the ground level and which usually splits into two descending roots that can go as deep as three feet. From this tuber, the long vines can extend for hundreds of feet along which large triangular green/gray leaves are produced. The gourd itself is usually 3-4 inches in diameter.

This plant has a long history dating back an estimated 5000 years as evidenced by seeds found in archeological digs at Hinds Cave historic site near the Pecos River. Native Americans for a variety of uses valued this plant. The root was used for medicinal purposes, the seeds are edible, and the dried gourd, which turns yellow when mature, was used as a rattle in rituals. The fetid odor of the crushed leaves is said to act as an insect repellent and insecticide. The oil can be used in cosmetics, and the root, which is rich in a combination of saponins, steroids, and sugars will foam when water is added and was used as a shampoo and as hand and laundry soap.

A word of caution is in order. The fruit and roots contain high levels of a group of triterpenoid glycosides that can be poisonous in high concentrations. All members of the domestic squash family produce these chemicals, but not in the high concentrations found in this native plant. So keep the children and pets from chewing or tasting them to a great extent.

An expanded list of uses for this interesting and ancient plant, along with some recipes for its use, can be found at the New Mexico State University web site <http://medplant.nmsu.edu/buffalo.shtm>
Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

Bell County master gardeners are taking applications now for the next yearly class starting January 2013. Space is limited! Applications can be downloaded from the website or picked up at the AgriLife Extension Office, 1605 North Main, Belton, Texas. [254-933-5305](tel:254-933-5305). The all-inclusive fee is \$250.

