

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Gary Slanga
The Luffa Sponge Gourd
Luffa aegyptia(*L. scylindrica*)

I was recently introduced to a large zucchini looking vegetable and asked what I thought it might be. To my surprise it looked very much like the Luffa (or Loofa) gourd, which belongs to the Cucurbitaceae or cucumber family. This is a unique gourd in that the luffa bath sponges are made from this vegetable. Believe it or not, because of its fibrous vascular tissue, it can also be used for packing material, filters, and various other decorating crafts. It is even used as a scrubbing pad for cleaning other vegetables!

Planting luffas from seed takes a little patience because they are slow to germinate. Seeds should be scarified and soaked over night before planting. Scarifying simply means that you scratch or abrade the seed coat so that water will penetrate faster. Luffas take longer to grow than most gourds, up to 140 days and mature later than other gourds. This gourd is also cold sensitive but loves hot weather. The gourd can be grown on the ground but does much better if allowed to climb on a trellis. The trellis has to be sturdy since the vines can reach well over fifteen feet in length and produce a great canopy of foliage. Fruit will be 12 to 18 inches long or longer and can weigh up to three pounds or more. For use as a vegetable, pick the fruit when it is very small, six inches or so. The vegetable is great in stews, soups or can be used like summer squash.

The gourds mature late in summer or early fall. They will turn yellow or brown when mature. Mature fruit is necessary for producing heavy fibrous tissue that make up the organic bath sponges that are sold. Leave the gourd on the vine for as long as possible but harvest before the first frost.

The Luffa gourd has many craft uses for the dried spongy flesh of this fruit. As gardeners in Central Texas with plenty of heat great success in growing it is very possible. For much more information on this unique gourd or for instructions on how to process the flesh for other uses, see the listed web sites.

<http://www.caes.uga.edu/extension/cobb/anr/Documents/luffa.pdf>

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas?
Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

