

Drying Gourds

Harvest gourds when the vine and stem dries and begins to turn brown. Be sure to complete your harvest before the first hard frost. Immature gourds will not cure correctly and rot, so only harvest mature fruit.

After harvest, wash the gourds in a mild bleach solution and dry off with a soft cloth. Discard any bruised, diseased or damaged fruit. To dry, place gourds on slatted trays or chicken wire fencing. Make sure they do not touch each other and are located in a warm, dry, well-ventilated location.

Curing can take one to six months, depending on the type of gourd. The outer skin hardens in one or two weeks, while the internal drying takes at least an additional month. Poke a small hole in the blossom end of the gourd to quicken internal drying. Occasionally turn the fruits, checking for uneven drying or soft spots. When you shake the gourd and hear the seeds rattling, it is cured and ready for a coat of paint or varnish, if desired.

— Mary Jane Frogge, UNL Extension Associate



Growing American Bittersweet

American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) is an easy-to-grow vine famous for a striking display of seedpods and berries each fall. Often used in wreaths or decorative displays, this ornamental vine adds value and interest to the garden all year long. Chinese bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), is considered an invasive plant and not recommended for planting in landscapes.

American bittersweet is a deciduous, perennial vine native to North America. Often found growing over fences or climbing up trees, their typical habitat includes rocky upland woodlands and along shady riverbanks of the central and eastern United States. American bittersweet has smooth, 2 to 4 inch long green leaves.

The vines produce tiny greenish-white flowers in June and in early fall, orange-yellow seed husks peel back to reveal scarlet-colored fruit. Bittersweet fruits are not safe for human consumption, but when left on the vine, they provide a much appreciated source of late winter food for many birds and small animals.

Fall is a good time to plant American bittersweet. If mulched and protected over winter during its first year, bittersweet will remain maintenance free for most of its long life.



Because of their climbing habit, bittersweet needs a very sturdy support.

To get the vine to produce brightly colored berries, you will need to plant both sexes of the vine within close proximity of one another. When purchasing plants from a nursery, be sure the sex of the vines are properly identified. The female vines produce the berries, but the sexes are impossible to tell apart until the plants are mature. One male plant will easily produce enough pollen for 6 to 8 female plants and bees are the main pollinators. It will take several years for the vines to produce fruit.

Bittersweet can be bought from a nursery or propagated from seeds or cuttings. Seeds sown in the spring need to be placed in containers of moist sand or peat and kept in the refrigerator at 34 to 41°F, for 3 months to break dormancy. Bittersweet vines grow



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well in both full sun and shade, although full sun is critical for fruit production. These vines are not particularly fussy about soil quality and pests seldom bother them. Because of their climbing habit, bittersweet needs a very sturdy support, either an upright trellis or a lateral fence. Do not let it climb up a tree, however, because the twining nature of these vines could easily girdle the trunk.

Occasional light pruning will keep plants tidy and help reign in their size. Pruning can be done in late winter or early spring.

American bittersweet is ready to harvest when you see the first orange capsules of the fruit split open to reveal the orange-red fruit inside. Cut stems to the length you desire and tie them into small bundles. Hang the bundles to dry in a warm, dark room. As the fruit dries, more unopened capsules will split open to reveal the fruits inside. Once dried, the vines make an attractive botanical display that will last for several years.

Source: Ellen Brown, Garden Columnist

Garden Guide THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

By Mary Jane Frogge, UNL Extension Associate

Plant spring flowering bulbs such as tulips, daffodils and crocus.

Cut down stems and foliage of herbaceous perennials after two or three hard frosts and when leaves begin to brown.

Fall is the time to control broadleaf weeds in the lawn, such as white clover, dandelion and ground ivy.

Dig and bring in cannas, dahlias and gladiolus. Dry, clean and store in a cool location free from frost.

After several hard frosts add mulch to your perennial flower garden. A one inch layer of straw or chopped leaves will help conserve soil moisture and protect the root system.

When deciding on new trees or shrubs to plant around your home, remember to select varieties that will fit the location when they are at their mature height. This will greatly reduce pruning and other maintenance in the future.

Pick bagworms from evergreen shrubs. This will eliminate the spring hatch from over wintered eggs.

Remove leaves from lawn to reduce lawn problems. Compost or shred and use them for mulch.

Make a note of any particularly productive or unsatisfactory varieties of vegetables you planted this year. Such information can be very useful when planning next years' garden.

Remove any diseased or insect-infested plant material from your garden, it may harbor over wintering stages of disease or insect pests. If you leave this plant material in your garden, you are leaving diseases and insects which will begin to reproduce again next spring and add to next years' pest problem.

Cure pumpkins, butternut and hubbard squash at temperatures between 70 to 80°F for two or three weeks immediately after harvest. After curing, store them in a dry place at 55 to 60°F.

Use dried herbs to make fragrant wreaths and dried flower arrangements.

Clean up the orchard and small fruit plantings. Sanitation is essential for good maintenance. Dried fruits or mummies carry disease organisms through the winter to attack next years crop.

Nut trees are a fine addition to the home landscape. They may accent the house, provide shade in the summer and even become a food source.

Christmas cactus need special care now to get its beautiful flowers this December. Buds will form at 50 to 60°F or if the plant is exposed to at least 13 hours of complete darkness each night.

Fall is an excellent time for taking soil samples in your lawn and garden. Soil tests will measure the pH of the soil, organic matter content and the levels of some of the major elements required for plant growth, such as phosphorus and potassium.

Storing Vegetables

Mary Jane Frogge,
UNL Extension Associate

After a successful garden season, you may have vegetables you would like to store until you are ready to use them. Here are suggestions to help you store your vegetables properly.

- **Carrots:** Trim carrot tops to one inch. Layer unwashed carrots in a container of moist sand. Carrots can be stored in a cool place, 35 to 40°F for 4 to 5 months.
- **Onions:** Store cured onions in a dry location at 35 to 40°F.
- **Potatoes:** Cure fresh dug potatoes 1 to 2 weeks in a dark, dry location at 50 to 60°F. Store cured potatoes in a dark location at 40°F for 5 to 6 months.
- **Sweet potatoes:** Cure fresh dug sweet potatoes at 80 to 85°F for 10 days. Store cured sweet potatoes in a dry, dark location at 55 to 60°F for 4 to 6 months.
- **Turnips:** Trim turnip tops to one inch. Layer unwashed turnips in a container of moist sand. Turnips can be stored in a cool place, 35 to 40°F for 4 to 5 months.
- **Winter squash:** Cure vine ripen winter squash for 10 days at 80 to 85°F and

high humidity. Store mature, cured winter squash in a dry location at 55°F for 2 to 6 months. Acorn squash will keep well in a dry place at 45°F for 35 to 40 days. Do not cure acorn squashes before storing them.

Storing your vegetables and fruit properly will insure you will have good quality produce to enjoy in the months ahead.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

UNL Extension NebGuide G1264 "Storing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables" available at the extension office or online at <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendl/g1264.pdf>

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