

How To Dry Gourds

Gourds can add a colorful touch to decorative arrangements or center pieces throughout the year, but they must be dried before they can be expected to last more than several weeks.

Michigan State University horticulturists offer the following gourd drying tips:

First, wash the gourds with a household disinfectant to help reduce the chances of spoilage.

Large or immature (green) gourds will dry faster if a one-quarter inch hole is drilled through the bottom of the gourd. Make sure the hole penetrates well into the seed cavity. The best guarantee of successful drying, however, is to use only mature gourds.

For drying, place the gourds on screens or in mesh or cheesecloth bags and hang them in a cool, well ventilated place. A garage is often a good place. The drying process takes about two to four weeks.

After drying, wash the gourds again with a household disinfectant to prevent mold. Dried gourds may be finished and polished with a good floor wax, furniture polish or clear varnish. Don't use shellac for this. It can shorten the life of the dried gourd.

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MSU Experts Offer Rat Control Advice

With cold weather approaching, neighborhood rats may be thinking about moving into your home for the winter.

Michigan State University wildlife experts offer the following advice that can help to prevent rats from invading houses: "Don't let 'em in!"

The old saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," applies to rat problems as well as the common cold.

● Keep the area around the house free from suitable rat hiding places.

● Don't pile coal, wood, straw, or similar materials against outside walls.

● Close all unnecessary openings with concrete or sheet metal.

● Don't allow litter to build up on the floor behind sinks, stoves or cabinets.

● Keep food supplies (pet foods too) in closed containers to shut off the rats' food supply.

● Screen or cover floor drains.

RAT TRAPS are still one of the most effective methods of control once the pests invade a house. Use 10 or 12 traps to do a good job.

Make the trap's trigger bigger by adding a one inch square piece of wire screen or

cardboard and place each trap where the rat will have to cross it.

Poisons offer the best bet for controlling rats, but they can be dangerous if small children or pets are near. Since the poisons are dangerous, MSU experts don't recommend them unless there are a lot of rats in the house.

If poisons must be used, buy a poison of the type called emetic. These poisons cause

vomiting in cats, dogs and humans and thus is the safest type to use. Rats lose out with emetic poisons because they can't vomit. Check the label carefully before buying—it will tell you if the poison is the emetic type.

For extra safety, place the poison where children and pets can't get to it.

Be sure to follow the directions on the package carefully.

Poinsettia Blooms Can Be Forced

If you saved last year's poinsettia and want it to bloom again this coming Christmas, now is the time to start giving the plant some extra attention, says a Michigan State University horticulturist.

According to Dr. William H. Carlson, September is an important month as far as poinsettia care is concerned. If your poinsettia was outside for the summer, it should be brought back inside before the first frost. "First

frost usually occurs around Sept. 15 in lower Michigan," Carlson says. The plant should be placed in a sunny window. "The procedure for forcing flowers must begin at the end of September in order to meet the Christmas deadline," says Carlson. The plant must be kept in complete darkness between 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily from Sept. 30 until about mid-December when color begins to show in the bracts (the petal-like leaves that are often thought of as flowers).

CARLSON says, "Complete darkness means no light at all. Lamps, street lights, and even flashlights should be avoided."

He also offers the following hints: "For best results keep the poinsettia where temperatures range between 60 and 70 degrees. Also, examine the soil daily. When it is dry to the touch add enough water to soak the soil to the bottom of the pot."

"Follow these procedures, and your poinsettia will add lots of color to your home during the coming holiday season," Carlson says.



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