

BIRDHOUSE GOURDS!

In the early summer as part of our work in the garden, we planted what I thought were going to be pumpkins. Knowing that they need a long growing season, the idea was to plant them before the 4th of July, which we duly did. However, when the seeds sprouted, although initially they looked like pumpkins, they started to develop an interest in climbing, and produced flowers that didn't look at all like pumpkin flowers!



Lo and behold we realized that in fact we were growing gourds, and beautiful birdhouse gourds at that! The location, outside the MPA library, bathed the growing gourds in sunshine, and also due to the lay of the land, fed them with much water.

To my surprise one day, one of our student volunteers to asked what they were and I was thrilled, it was indeed a birdhouse gourd. I started to learn more about them and a plot was hatched! We would see how many would grow, and then cure them ourselves, and hang them around campus. They would encourage attracting birds to use them. Wrens have been seen housed in them, but also purple martins (though here I have not seen any).

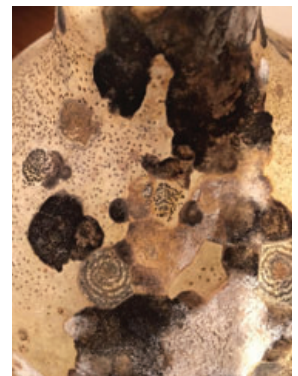


At the end of the growing season, September/October of 2021, we waited for the vines to wither. We harvested the gourds which were of all shapes and sizes and weights! There were 28 in total and every single one was perfect!



I learned that we should wash them in a very light bleach solution, and then dry them and store them, but where!? Although I could have asked MPA to help, I had already burdened the maintenance crew with the garden tools, so I decided to find a space at home, in the garage. Somewhere not too hot, not too cold, just right! I lay them out, not touching each other, and waited. I was worried - they developed spots, and became discolored. I was worried that they were becoming moldy but not at all. This was just part of the curing process that I learned would take up to 6 months!

The patterns that the gourds developed were unique and beautiful. After the gourds had cured, the skins developed these lovely patterns, and the fruit (the gourd) became much lighter. When I shook them I could feel the seeds jiggling about inside and I knew that they were ready for the next phase.





Some may have spotted two people in the LS parking lot in December and early January, in the freezing cold with a drill, much shivering, and laughing too. Lee, (a new parent this past year) and I figured out the size of the hole for the bird to enter the birdhouse gourd. Lee made three holes in the top to hang them. He had a brilliant idea of three holes in the base to allow for drainage! For a few weeks we could be found after drop off, drilling holes in the gourds, our hands absolutely freezing!

At home out of the horrid cold I used a big sewing needle to help pull thin metal wire through the holes that Lee had made to hang the gourds. I had initially wanted to use twine, or something natural, but this proved too much of a challenge so I resorted to thin wire. I then did this to each gourd, and afterwards hung them up to continue to dry.

Before bringing them back to school I found some seeds in the gourds. I collected them in order to repeat the same process this coming year. I also left some in the gourds for the birds to use as protein as they settle in (and hopefully not for the squirrels to come and raid!) Our hope of having LS students hang the gourds was fulfilled. If you happen to spot them, now you know more of the story behind these beautiful structures!



If you'd like to be part of the gardening process at MPA, get together with others – many of us are learning on the job but all love to be outdoors – and doing things in the garden, do come and join us as the weather improves. There is room for everybody, lots to do, and much fun to be had! Contact Michelle Mick (LS and MS Mum) at michelle_wessely@yahoo.com or via text at 651-328-7312 if you would like to join our merry band of gardening volunteers or have questions.