Grow Your Own Loofa (Luffa) for Sponges

Yep, you don't have to do without or purchase sponges if you grow your own.

Please don't confuse Loofa with Sea sponges, which are part of the animal kingdom and grow on the sea floor.

Loofa's are part of the cucurbit family, a group of plants including gourds, pumpkins, and cucumbers. So you will not want to grow these near any of those plants to avoid cross pollination.

These plants originated in subtropical Asia. But like most plants if you provide the right conditions they can be grown just about anywhere. LuffaInfo has been growing and enjoying loofa fiber since the mid 1990s in Carter County Tennessee.

I have started two of these plants on my back porch and will see how this goes.

See the following sites for great information, how to grow, harvest and save seeds, etc.

http://www.luffa.info/ Tons of history, pictures and how to
http://www.luffa.info/luffagrowing.htm
http://www.luffa.info/luffaharvest.htm

http://www.backwoodsliving.com/loofah.html Great How to

http://www.ehow.com/how_5100993_grow-loofahs.html

http://www.groovygreen.com/groove/?p=689
"No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden." -- Thomas Jefferson

TNT

A 50 Something, Homesteading Prepper

Grow Loofah From Backwoods Home  http://www.backwoodsliving.com/loofah.html

Loofah sponges are also known as dishrag, sponge or loofah gourds and are used for cleaning, stuffing material and if small enough, eating. Like most gourds, loofahs require a long growing season to mature. Loofahs also require trellis or fence to grow on after the roots are established. Loofahs are harvested in the fall just before the first frost in most areas.

Items:
- Loofah seed
- Peat pots
- Potting soil
- Large garden space
- Trellis or fence
- Mulch

1. Plan to start your seeds indoors in the late winter. Because loofahs take a long time to mature, you will want to have the seedlings ready to transplant in the spring.
2. Fill peat pots half full with potting soil and place 1 loofah seed in each pot. Cover with 1/2 inch of additional potting soil. Water the peat pots and place in a warm area of your home.
3. Transplant the loofah seeding to your garden space after all danger of frost has passed in your area. Create hills or mounds six feet apart and place 2 or 3 plants in each hill.
4. Train the loofah plants to the trellis or fence as they grow by stringing the vines through the fencing or trellis slats.
5. Mulch the plants heavily during the mid-summer to help them retain moisture when watered.
6. Harvest the loofahs when the stems turn yellow and the skins are dry.
7. Set the harvested loofahs in a single layer to dry. They are fully dry when the skins turn leathery and brown. This will take approximately 2 weeks.
8. Soak the loofahs in warm water overnight to help make peeling the skins from the sponges easier. Dry the peeled loofahs in the sun. This will also help to bleach the color of the sponges to a light tan.

Words to the Wise:

If you soak the seeds for up to 2 days before planting, they will germinate faster.
Loofah vines can grow to 15 feet or longer and will take over a garden if not trellised in some fashion.

Loofahs love full sun and fertile soil. Add compost to the hills before planting to encourage maximum growth.

**Everything you might want to know from Luffa Info** [http://www.luffa.info/](http://www.luffa.info/)

Welcome to Luffa.info! Here you will find information and pictures about the amazing Luffa sponge gourd. Luffa sponge gourds have many names, both common and scientific. They are known as smooth loofah, loofah, loofah sponge, loofa, luffa, loufa, loufah, sponge gourd, Chinese okra, elephant okra, dishrag gourd, and other common names. The scientific names for this plant include Luffa cylindrica, Luffa aegyptiaca, or Luffa aegyptica. There are also different related species of Luffa within the Luffa genus.

We have been growing and enjoying our natural luffa fiber since the mid 1990s here in Carter County Tennessee. We went to organic growing methods in the 21st century.

**WHAT IS A LOOFAH?**

A loofah as it is commonly known, is a fibrous plant seed pod. The luffa plant is a cucurbit, a group of plants including gourds, pumpkins, and cucumbers. It grows as a flowering annual vine of subtropical Asian origin. The pollinated flowers grow cylindrical green fruits that eventually develop into a seed pod filled with many intertwined fibers. The skin is removed to reveal the "loofah" inside.

Sea sponges are part of the animal kingdom. They grow on the sea floor and filter food out of the water. The word sponge is often used to describe loofah and man made "sponges" with absorbent sea sponge properties.

**USES FOR LUFFA/LOOFAH SPONGES**

When mature, the fruits become a tough mass of cellulose fiber that makes a great scrubbing sponge. These natural cellulose fiber sponge wonders of the vegetable world have many uses. They'll make your skin squeaky clean or shine up your dirty dishes. Luffa are most excellent in the bath or shower. The exfoliating action leaves your skin feeling the cleanest and tightest it could possibly be. Scrubbing your back with a luffa sponge in the bath or shower is an incredibly pleasurable experience. Home artisan craft soap makers include slices of luffa in their creations to add an extra cleaning boost to their soaps. Shredded or powdered luffa can be also be mixed into soap.

Luffa sponges are great for washing items like large pots and other containers. We use them for cleaning almost everything, including cars, boats, plastic buckets, and anything that needs scrubbed but can't withstand steel wool. Non-stick cookware is one example.

A large loofah or a smaller piece on a handle or rope makes a great back scratcher. They can be cut into many shapes for scrubbing pads, padding, and other craft uses. Cut the sponges lengthwise and remove the core to make sheets of sponge material. These sheets of luffa material can be sewn into items like table hot pads, sandals, bath mats, hats, or anything else you can imagine.

The luffa flowers and fruits are soft and edible when young and are sometimes cooked and eaten like squash or okra. Luffa has been an important food source in many Asian cultures. The leaves and vines should not be eaten. When crushed, they produce a bitter compound and smell that seems to repel insects and animals. It is similar to the bitterness sometimes found in cucumbers, a close plant relative also in the Cucurbitaceae family. We don't know what this stuff is, maybe some bright botanist or biochemist can fill us in and we'll post it here. According to some sources a
fellow named Wehmer identified a substance known as luffeine for the bitterness of Luffa acutangula, a related species grown commonly for food.

We eat small luffa fruits often but disclaim any legal responsibility for any bad reactions anyone might have from consuming luffa. Unknown allergy potential. Eat at your own risk. Some luffa varieties may produce fruits that are too bitter to eat. Peeling the skin off removes some of the bitterness. If it tastes bad, don't eat it. The many varieties we've grown have all tasted good to us. Luffa is consumed by many people around the world, especially in Asia and Africa.

Edible luffa can be found sometimes in markets with Asian style vegetables. We like them sliced in a stir fry or just sauteed in a little olive oil. Seasoning with a dash of soy sauce and cayenne pepper makes a tasty appetizer. The flowers have a crunchy green flavor similar to celery or cucumber. They make a colorful salad. The edible size fruits taste something like a cross between a zucchini and a cucumber.

Luffa, like many plants, contains a variety of substances. Parts of the plant and seeds have been used for the medicinal properties. Powdered luffa fibers have been an ingredient in traditional Chinese herbal medicine. One Egyptian study found the seeds of luffa reduced blood glucose levels in animals. More medicinal references can be found on our links page.

Many of our loofahs end up as gifts for family and friends. People tend to find them very interesting and useful. We sell all the rest to an artisan soap maker. If you are looking for some loofahs or seeds you can find them at the sources we have listed on our luffa sources page.

**CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF LUFFA SPONGES**

New unused luffa fiber will last for years if it is kept dry. It needs to be covered where dust won't settle on the surface. Working luffa sponges will last a surprisingly long time if they are allowed to dry between uses, usually a few months. When they stay wet all the time they tend to deteriorate more.

Hanging on a hook or placing on end may help your loofah to dry. A luffa sponge can hold some dirt and should not be used for different purposes. If you scrub your cooking grill with it, then don't use it on your skin. It is probably difficult to fully sterilize a loofah. Enough heat applied long enough would do it but might damage the luffa fibers. A short soak in a mild bleach solution gets close, certainly killing off a vast majority of surface germs. A scrub with antibacterial soap should remove many germs too. Sunlight can help keep your loofah in top shape by drying it faster and irradiating the surface with natural ultraviolet light. The drying UV rays will make it harder for germs, mold, or mildew to grow.

Some commercial luffa sponges are a light color from being bleached. Natural mature sponges can be any shade of dark brown to bright white in color. Most loofahs are fine in their natural state without any bleaching. If you want to lighten luffa fibers, they can be soaked in a weak chlorine bleach solution for about an hour or so. Some commercial growers may also use a hydrogen peroxide or caustic solution. Bleaching them for too long can weaken the fibers. Bleached sponges may look better for commerce. They are cleaner and less likely to contain insects or other organic matter.

Green and/or dark stained luffa can benefit from bleaching. Exposure to sunlight can also lighten the color but not as dramatically as bleach. Leaving them in the sun for extended periods gives the loofah a rougher scratchier feel.

**A LITTLE ABOUT LUFFA VARIETIES**

Most garden varieties of luffa are coarser, less dense, and more flexible than the stiffer pieces of commercial loofah. The commercial loofah is grown for size and fiber density. Most are also grown in a warm climate and have the benefit of a long growing season. Denser sponge would be better for things that require strength and durability. A less dense
sponge is more flexible and good for molding into things like luffa soap. The thickness and number of the individual fibers can vary greatly among loofah sponges. A hard or soft sponge can have thin or thick fibers. Usually the more fiber, the stiffer the loofah. There are also varieties that are grown primarily for eating and these may produce weaker fiber. Luffa cross pollinate easily so it might be difficult to grow different types together. Whatever characteristics the luffa have, they can be altered somewhat by careful selection of the seeds. The plants have a lot of natural variability among different plants grown from the same seeds and even between luffa pods grown on the same vine. One vine could grow several different sizes and shapes.

We started with a typical garden variety and kept saving our best seeds. Over time, the quality and quantity of our sponges improved. We saved seeds from the earliest large sponges with good fiber. After a few seasons, they were arriving sooner and larger. We tried growing seeds from many sources and did find some denser fiber that would still reach maturity in our climate. Generally, the higher the density of the fiber, the longer it takes to reach maturity.

Luffa can grow arrow straight, slightly curved, or very curved. One luffa variety grows very short and wide sponges. These are typically used for pot scrubbbers. Another type, grown more often for food, produces extremely thin long fruits. Seeds from straight ones tend to grow more straight ones, but a few curved ones usually appear. The curved ones make good back scratchers in the shower. When small, the fruits are very flexible and will conform to whatever shape they are against. This can result in some very unusual shapes. Loofahs can also be much wider on one or both ends, usually the bottom.

The ridged or angled luffa (Luffa acutangula) is a different species of luffa. It produces fiber but is more often used as a food crop. It can be identified by the pronounced ridges that run along the skin lengthwise. It tends to be thinner, bent or curved, and more elongated than the Luffa cylindrica. Edible luffa found in markets is probably more often acutangula than the cylindrica species. Luffa acutangula is also commonly known as Patola in the Tagalog language of the Philippines. Luffa foetida is another scientific name for the angled luffa. Visit our links page for more info about acutangula.

Another curiosity of the luffa world is the round or ball luffa. Not sure what species this is and we've not encountered any of these unusual sponges, but the American Gourd Society has a picture of one on their luffa page (http://americangourdsociety.org/FAQ/types/luffa.html).

GROWING YOUR OWN LUFFA SPONGES Growing your own sponges is fun and rewarding. Once they get established, the plants are quite vigorous. They grow on vines that can reach 30 feet (9m) in length. A strong supporting trellis is a must. Chain link fence and lattice works great. The more support points the better. The fruits get very heavy. Luffa may survive in partial shade with some direct sunlight, but produce more in full sun. In a very hot dry climate they will need some watering as they tend to wilt if it gets too dry. Yearly rainfall here is typically 40 to 50 inches (102-127 cm). Our vines don’t normally need to be watered after the roots have developed. If the leaves are wilting noticeably, then they may need additional water.

These plants are subtropical in origin, believed to have originated in southern Asia. They need a long hot growing season. Places like the US Gulf Coast are plenty hot. Starting the plants indoors may be needed for cooler climates. We live around 36 degrees north latitude at 1900 ft (550m) altitude, USDA zone 6. The outdoor season is long enough to produce mature sponges planted outside from seed but some later ones may be lost to frost. Starting them indoors and moving them outside after the last frost normally gives us a few more sponges in the fall. Planting directly into the ground is almost as good. One year, cool May weather stunted our plants, while some seeds we planted in the ground sprouted and surpassed the older plants. Warm weather is necessary. Germination rates may be slightly lower for outside plantings. Putting the seeds in a moist environment before planting helps increase germination rates. There can
be a lot of variability in the time needed for germination. It could be 3 days or over 3 weeks! Typically it is around a week to two weeks. The drier and harder the seeds are, the longer they usually take to germinate.

The time it takes for luffa growth, flowering, and maturity can vary widely between plants. It usually requires around 150 days or more, but it could be anywhere from 120 to 200 days. Some of the sources on our luffa links page also have botanical and growing information.

The small seedlings grow slowly while the roots become established. Once they begin to make a vine, the increase in growth rate is phenomenal. After 1 to 2 months of growing, the flower clusters appear. The flowers bloom in an orderly progression as the vine lengthens. Typically there is a larger solitary female flower on a thicker stem and a thinner stem with a cluster of male flowers. When the vines are blooming, the bright yellow flowers attract many pollen gathering creatures. Bumblebees love luffa flowers and will travel great distances to reach them. Ants enjoy cruising all over the vines and cause little or no harm, assisting in pollination. Some female flowers will wilt and fall off while the pollinated ones will form a luffa seed pod. The male flowers fall off after they bloom in sequence up the stalk. The bright yellow flowers are quite pretty and abundant. See our luffa photos for some examples.

When the flowers get pollinated, slender cucumber-like vegetables appear. The fruits stay soft until the skin thickens. Then the fiber begins to form. The vines continue to grow and produce fruit until the sponges begin to mature. They can be harvested whenever they feel ready. The earlier ones can be picked while the vine is still growing. Typically they turn a yellow/brown color and become lighter in weight from drying out. Mature luffa pods can be any color from green to nearly black. Very small sponges can be mature and very large ones may not be ready. Size and color doesn’t matter much. The important thing is that they start to dry and lose weight. Time to maturity varies considerably as our sponges are picked from early September to late November. The last of our loofahs are harvested after a frost occurs and the vines quickly die off. The more mature they are, the better the sponge fiber quality. Some smaller ones may mature more quickly, yielding a small soft sponge, good for washing delicate skin.

**HARVESTING AND PREPARING LUFFA SPONGES**

When the loofahs are ready for harvest they can be peeled. The skin loses green color and becomes looser when mature. The mature sponges begin to dry and lose water weight. If the sponges have reached full growth and feel light, they will be ready to peel. If they are green, the loofah may contain some fiber but be much harder to peel. If it falls apart when you try to peel, it doesn’t have enough fiber and is not mature enough.

It is always best to peel them as soon as possible if the vine has died. The longer the skin stays on, the darker the sponges will get. Peeling greener luffa is difficult but can be done if needed. Throwing the loofah at the ground is one trick. It’s good exercise for relieving your stress too. The bad ones will break apart, while the good ones will crack and loosen the skin. Letting the luffas freeze and thaw once on the vine also makes them easier to peel.

If they have matured they are usually easy to get open. Soaking in water may help the opening process. After peeling, high water pressure from a hose sprayer can remove much of the remaining green and brown coloration. Wash them well, squeeze out excess water, lay out to dry, rotate occasionally as the water settles in the lower side. Placing them outside in the sun and wind dries them quickly. The sun also tends to lighten the color. Hanging or placing the loofahs on a screen works well for drying too.

If they are stained, a soak in some bleach and water will lighten them considerably. A wet harvest season tends to cause more decay and brown spots in the sponges. An unusually dry fall in one particular year yielded sponges that were very light in color, an almost fluorescent white. For a photo illustrating the extreme color range of some natural late wet weather sponges vs. earlier dry weather sponges. Getting all the seeds out can be a challenge, but the drier the sponges
are, the easier the seeds will fall out. Save the best ones for next year. You can also cut open the sponges in any shape you want to remove seeds or make a loofah fiber mat.

Seeds should be allowed to dry enough so they won't rot or mold and then stored in a cool place. Refrigerate or freeze in a sealed airtight container for long term storage. We've had reports of seeds as old as ten years still germinating. If the seeds are allowed to get too hot and dry they become hard. Some hard seeds can still germinate but it may take a month to sprout.

How to Grow Luffa  [http://www.luffa.info/luffagrowing.htm](http://www.luffa.info/luffagrowing.htm)

Growing luffa requires a certain amount of patience. It grows slower than most gourds. The seeds sometimes take weeks to germinate. The plants remain small for a long time while the roots are developing. Luffa is a hot weather plant and growth slows in cool weather. The flowers appear over an extended period of time, blooming as the vine progresses. Once the fruits form it may take a long time to develop fiber and dry out for harvest. Then the work of harvesting, peeling, and cleaning happens late in the year. Luffa requires about 140 to 180 or more frost free days, lots of sunshine, warmth, water, good root nutrients, and a large strong trellis.

The first step is to select seeds for planting. Good mature seeds are typically dark and hard. Immature seeds are a light color and are softer. Luffa seeds look similar to watermelon seeds. Save the seeds from your best loofahs in the fall for the next year. Seeds can be obtained from the suppliers on our sources page. Luffa can be grown by directly planting into the ground in warmer climates, USDA zones 7 and higher. Zone 6 is borderline for direct to earth seed planting but can work. It’s just that some of the later sponges might be lost to frost. Plant 3 to 4 seeds per location about 1/2 inch deep in small hills of soil. Space hills a minimum of 3 feet (1m) apart. 6 feet (2m) is much better.

For areas where the growing season time is marginal, starting the seeds in pots well ahead of the last frost date is a better choice. The plants develop large roots and should be planted in containers that are big enough for the time needed. Plant 3 or 4 seeds about 1/2 to 3/4 inch deep in some potting soil. Germination and growth is dependent on the soil temperature so place the pots in a warm place. Keep the soil moist but not too wet. Germination time varies widely. It could take three weeks or longer. Usually it is less than 10 days. Luffa seed germination rates can vary widely, about 50 to 60% for ideal planting conditions. Some seeds may take much longer than others from the same batch.
Thin plants to one per pot or planting location. The seedlings grow slowly while the roots develop. Provide lots of sun and don't let the soil get too dry. Small pots may need water every day, just don't over water. The plants can't survive muddy waterlogged soil. These plants were started in 4 inch (10cm) pots which is good for about a one month early start. If the luffa plants will be in pots for longer than a month a 5 or 6 inch (13-15cm) pot would be better. We reuse our plastic pots but peat pots are another environmentally friendly way to start plants. Plantable peat pots minimize root damage and transplant shock. Tearing the bottom and side when planting will help the roots grow out.

Once the plants send out the first normal leaf or two, the luffa are big enough to transplant. The roots by this time may be 6 inches (15 cm) long or longer. Wait until all danger of frost is passed and the soil is reasonably warm. Luffa are somewhat sensitive to transplant shock so be careful when planting. Leaving the plants outside a couple days before planting helps them to adapt. Luffa plants prefer good well drained soil but seem to tolerate a fairly wide range of soil types. Working some organic compost into the ground a few months before planting can help feed the roots.
While the luffa are small they are vulnerable to weeds and pests. It is important to keep the weeds off them. Shade from weeds will stunt the plants at this point. Slugs can damage the small stems. Birds may snip off pieces. Black plastic or dark mulch around the small luffa plants will help warm the soil and reduce weeds. Once the vines begin to bolt and grow larger, the luffa are tough enough to mostly fend for themselves. The vines will climb over most obstacles.

The luffa vines must have a strong trellis system to climb. We grow most of ours on chain link fence because it is already there. The vines prefer to grow much taller and will do better on a 6 to 10 foot (2-3 m) high trellis. The vine length can exceed 30 feet (9m). Typically ours reach about 15 ft (4-5m). The loofah sponges can get heavy, so the more places the vine tendrils can hold on to the better. They won't grow as well on a single cable as they do growing into lattice or fence links with many support points. Luffa will circle and climb wooden poles if the surface is rough enough. They can also climb on walls with a rough surface.
After the vines bloom, pollination has to occur before a fruit forms. Bees of all types are attracted to the big yellow flowers and perform much of the work. Ants also spend a lot of time on Luffa vines. There are small triangular leaf-like structures at the base of the flowers that attract ants. The blooms will fall off and the pollinated ones will form the start of a loofah sponge at the base of the former flower. If pollinating insects are in short supply, the flowers can be hand pollinated. Pull off a male flower and rub it on the females or else use a cotton swab to move pollen between flowers.

Ready to pick your luffa? Visit the luffa harvest page.

**How to Harvest Home Grown Luffa**  [http://www.luffa.info/luffaharvest.htm](http://www.luffa.info/luffaharvest.htm)

Welcome to the luffa.info loofah sponge harvest page! Here are photos with step by step descriptions of luffa sponge gourds from the home garden being picked, peeled, and cleaned for use.

When to pick your loofah is the big question. The luffa seed pods can hang on the vine until they are crisp and dry if they have fully matured but it isn't necessary to wait that long. It is easier to peel them when they are more dry. However, the loofahs tend to get darker the longer they hang. If it rains much it is also likely to develop rot or dark spots. For the fiber to be fully developed, you don't want to pick it too soon either. If the skin feels loose, like it will come off easily, then it's ready. Waiting until the skin gets papery dry and brown is not necessary. If any part turns black from decay then it should be peeled before the whole thing rots.

Once the green color has started leaving and the weight has decreased, the fiber has mostly stopped growing. Feel and lift to see the difference. Anytime after that, they can be picked and peeled. If they have been hit by frost, they have quit developing and should be peeled soon before they begin rottting. If the vines have died off before reaching full maturity, there may still be some good fiber, but they will be harder to peel.
The first step is to select a loofah that is ready to be peeled. Luffa lose the darker green color and become lighter in weight when ready. Some varieties go from green to dark brown. Some types turn a yellow or brown color. The photos show two different varieties. Sometimes just being a lighter green signals ripeness. The skin feels loose and thinner when they are ready to pick. If it feels like it can be peeled easily then it is ready.

The loofah sponges can be removed by twisting until the vine breaks. If the vine is still alive it may be desirable to neatly cut the sponges off in order to minimize damage to the vine.
Slamming the luffa against a hard surface will loosen the skin and knock the seeds loose. Slightly crushing the sponges can also loosen the skin. This is especially helpful for peeling less mature loofah with hard green skin.

The bottom tip of the sponge is easily knocked off. Many of the seeds can be shaken out before peeling. Seeds should be allowed to dry before storing. Luffa seeds have a thin clear layer on the outside that comes off easily after drying. Gently rub and blow off the seed coating. As soon as the seeds have dried, store in a cool place. Refrigerate or freeze in airtight containers for long term storage.

Use your thumbs to find a loose spot along a seam. Push in to create a tear and pull apart the skin. Tear up the seam. If the loofah is fully ripe it will come off easily. If not, then some slamming, crushing, and digging with fingernails may be needed.
Peel the skin back off one end, usually the top, and pull off the other end. Do whatever works best for you. After peeling a few you'll get a feel for the best method. Try to get all the skin off as little pieces left behind tend to turn brown.

Applying a thorough high pressure water spray from a hose removes most of the sap color. It washes out many seeds also. Squeeze and shake out excess water. If your luffa fiber is very dark, or has many dark spots, soaking in a bucket of water with some chlorine bleach will remove most stains and sap. It doesn't take much bleach, maybe one cup for 3 to 5 gallons of water. Don't bleach any longer than needed. Rinse well. Most loofahs are good without bleaching. This one was rinsed with water only. Then dried.
The final result is a loofah drying in the sun. Allow to dry completely, rotate as needed. The sunlight will slightly lighten and change the color. Leaving in the sunlight for longer periods will change the texture of the loofah, it gets rougher feeling. Make sure it is completely dry before storing or mold may grow on any remaining sap. Store dry loofahs in a bag or box where dust won't settle on them. They can be kept for years as long as they stay dry and dust free.

How To Make (and grow) A Luffa!  
http://www.groovygreen.com/groove/?p=689
By Aaron Newton in Green Living, How To | November 26, 2006

For the third autumn in a row I am pleased to be harvesting my shower sponge for next year. Now I know that must sound like a strange statement but it’s true. Many people are surprised when they find out I grow my own Luffa
sponges. “Don’t those come from the sea?”, is the standard question to which I respond that the Luffa is a vegetable you can grow in your very own garden.

This annual requires a long growing season of frost free weather. But for those of you in colder climates it is possible to start seedlings indoors and then transplant them outside allowing you to grow your own sponges. The vine can grow to great lengths producing beautiful yellow flowers all summer. Next spring I will be sure to remind you to start your sponges. Right now though I am focused on the harvest. I almost waited too late to get my Luffa started this spring so I was lucky to get a hand full of mature sponges. This one grew right outside my bedroom window.

I pick the fruit just after the first frost kills the vine. Next I peel off the outer skin.

Then comes the process of “milking” the sponge- squeezing it repeatedly from the middle towards the ends in an attempt to remove the fleshy substance inside. Plenty of seeds will come out as well.
I set aside some of the seeds from my best sponges for next year. If a sponge is discolored I soak it for 5 minutes in warm water with a little bleach. Add a length of hemp rope if you like to hang up your shower sponge. A large crop can yield quite a few Christmas gift sure to have your friends and family talking. Try growing your own Luffa sponge next year.

Quite a few people were interested in my recent harvest of Luffa shower sponges. I thought I’d explain a bit more about the plant and the process of growing it. Luffa aegyptiaca Mill. or as it is commonly called, the Loofah, is a vegetable native to South America. It can be eaten when it is smaller. I have stir fried them but only up to a size of about 4 inches. After that they become tough like an over ripe squash. Left to fully mature each fruit produces an excellent sponge. Seeds for this plant are readily available through vegetable catalogs and you’ll only have to buy seeds your first year—one mature Luffa sponge will produce at least 30 seeds. Some will produce many more.

Frost kills the plant and it needs 4 to 5 months of growth to produce sponges. Here in North Carolina I can plant seeds directly in the ground near the date of the last frost and then harvest a modest number of sponges later in autumn. If I wanted a better yield or if I lived further north I would start them indoors several weeks, maybe even a month before the date of the last frost and transplant them outdoors after frost danger has passed. Planting them on the sunny, southern side of your property will help. They are natural climbers and are happiest running up the sides of a trellis or even the outer walls of your home. I sprinkle a few seeds near, but not in front of, one of my south facing gutter downspouts. When the plant sprouts it climbs up the downspout and along my gutters. It doesn’t impede the flow of water and in the fall when the plant dies I easily pull it off of my home. The large Luffa leaves help to shade the hottest side of my house in the summer. I am certain they could be grown just as well on a large trellis. They can get quite long. I’ve grown vines that exceeded 15 feet in length.

Sometimes Luffas left to fully mature and turn brown or Luffas that ripen lying on the ground will have brown splotches of color throughout the sponge. For some people this isn’t a problem. Others however do not like bathing with something that is several different shades of rust. After I remove the outer skin and squeeze out the pulp and seeds from inside the Luffa, I often soak them in a weak solution of bleach and warm water for about 5 minutes. This is
especially true of the Luffa sponges I give as gifts. The process usually lightens the color and gets rid of dark brown spots. After doing so I let them dry thoroughly by hanging them up or placing them on a drying rack. It is also possible to dye the Luffas if you think you’d like bathing with a pink sponge.

I highly suggest you try growing Luffa sponges; even those of you in Northern climates with shorter growing seasons. Each morning as I start my day, I am reminded of my commitment to becoming more self-sufficient when I shower using a sponge I grew myself.

How to Grow Loofah Sponges  

The loofah is a versatile sponge that can be used for bathing yourself or cleaning the house. Actually a type of gourd, the loofah is simple to grow if you have some room in your garden or a smaller space and a trellis.

Things You'll Need:
- Growing medium
- Pot
- Paper towel
- Trellis, wall or tree
- Knife
- Water and container
- Liquid soap
- Bleach

Step 1
Purchase the seeds in the winter. Find them listed as sponge gourds, loofah gourds or dishrag gourds at websites like The Banana Tree, Luffa Info and Virtual Seeds.

Step 2
Check your zone. Loofah sponge gourds like warm weather. They are perennials that require a long growing season. If you’re north of the Mason-Dixon line, start the plant indoors a month before the last frost. Place the seed between 2 paper towels that are warm and damp to germinate.

Step 3
Use a commercial growing medium as the soil and plant to a depth that is twice that of the seed size. Keep warm and moist. Once the plant has popped through the soil, make certain that it has plenty of light. A window can work, but a grow light is better.

Step 4
Transplant outside after all danger of frost has passed. Put the plant in a sunny location with a trellis, tree or fence to climb. Make certain that the location has plenty of sun and objects to climb.

Step 5
Train the vines to go where you want. The plant first gets yellow or orange flowers, and the long fruit appears when the flowers die. Let the fruit mature.

Step 6
Pick the fruit and take it in when it turns a yellow-brown and feels much lighter. The gourd has a dried leathery skin when it’s ready. If the gourds are sufficiently dry, you can shake them and hear the seeds move.

Step 7
Cut off the blossom end of the sponge and allow the seeds to drop out. Soak in water several times, changing the water frequently. Wash in soapy water, and then soak in hot water for about 2 to 3 hours.
Bleach in a mild bleach and water solution for 15 minutes. This removes any brown spots on the sponge. Rinse thoroughly in clean cool water, making certain the bleach is removed. Sun dry or air dry and store.

Tips & Warnings

• Save some of the seeds that you removed to restock your seed supply.
• Loofah may also be spelled as "luffa" or "lufah."
• Don’t plant this near cucumbers, pumpkins, other gourds or squash. They will crossbreed.

By G. K. Bayne

Loofah sponges are gourds that are members of the cucumber plant family. Used for centuries as both a sponge and food, they are easy to grow and harvest for personal use. Once you have your space prepared, growing loofahs takes very little effort and time. A single loofah vine can produce 20 or more fruits, each weighing about 5 pounds.

Things You’ll Need:

• Loofah seeds
• Peat pots or other growing containers
• Potting soil
• Garden space with full sun
• Wooden or wire trellis

Step 1
Start your seeds in the early spring indoors or in a greenhouse. Use peat pots or other growing containers and a good grade potting soil.

Step 2
Prepare the garden space by mixing in compost or fertilizer. Allow a space of 4 feet for every loofah vine you plan to plant.

Step 3
Build a trellis in the garden space for the vines to grow on. Loofahs, like all gourds, like to climb toward the sun. If you cannot build a trellis, collect a number of large flat rocks for the fruit to grow on so they are off the dirt.

Step 4
Transplant the loofah seedlings after all danger of frost has passed. There should be 4 feet of space between seedlings in all directions.

Step 5
Train the vines to the trellis as the plants grow by weaving the vines through the trellis slats. If no trellis is available, place a rock beneath the growing fruits to prevent rotting on the vine.

Step 6
Prune the first flowers off the plants to encourage growth. Also prune away any fruit that is misshapen. A loofah should resemble a cucumber as it grows.

Step 7
Harvest the loofahs when the vines have browned and dried in the early fall.

Tips & Warnings

• When small, loofahs can be harvested and eaten like cucumbers or used in stir-fry. Loofah can be spelled a variety of ways; loufah, luffa and luffah are all acceptable alternative spellings. Loofahs are also known as sponge or towel gourds.