

Loofa (or Loofah, Luffa)

Did you know that you can grow loofa – the sponge you use as a body scrub in the shower, or the dishcloth for scrubbing pots in the kitchen – in your garden? Loofa is actually the fibrous remains of the mature loofa fruit. The plant is native to the Old World tropics, there are about 6 species in the genus, two better known species cultivated in temperate climates are *L. acutangular* (the angled loofa, ridged loofa, Chinese okra) and *L. aegyptiaca* or *L. cylindrica* (the smooth loofa, Egyptian loofa, or gourd loofa). Angled loofa has long ridges running the length of the fruit while smooth loofa has a rounder profile, with shallow creases running the length of the fruit. These two species are used pretty much interchangeably and both are vigorous annual vines with showy yellow flowers with lobed cucumber-like leaves, belonging to the Cucurbitaceae or gourd family, along with their distant cousins squashes, cucumbers, melons.



Loofa flower, leaves and fruit



Varieties of bathroom loofa products

In the Western world, until recently, loofas are cultivated mostly for loofa sponges, the fruits are left hanging on the vine and allowed to fully ripen and dried, their skin turns brown and tough, their flesh disappears leaving only the fibrous skeleton and seeds. The next step is to peel off the tough outer skin; if it is already cracked you can pull it off in pieces; if it is intact, try squashing the fruit gently until cracks appear; if the skin is very dry, soaking the fruit in water for a few minutes may make it easier to dislodge. Once the skin has been removed, shake out the seeds, save the good ones for planting next season, then wash the sap off the remaining sponge-like (there is a

fairly large amount of it) with water. The sponges are naturally tan or light brown, but manufacturers like to bleach them in a weak bleach solution to get a more uniform colour. It isn't necessary to bleach them,

though the unbleached sponge can appear "stained" in some spots, bleaching them does ensure that they are clean and attractive looking. Finally, dry the washed sponges in the sun, when completely dried, they will keep for years. Environmentally conscious consumers appreciate that loofa products are natural, biodegradable and a renewable resource.

Loofa sponges are tough on dirt but non-abrasive, perfect for scrubbing skin as well as dishes and other utensils etc. Crafters even use slices of the dried sponge in soaps to create pretty and useful all-in-one loofa soap rounds. The dried fibre is also used to make filters, table mats, insoles, sandals, shock absorber in helmets and other products; but the most popular use is as an exfoliant for scrubbing and removing dead skin, stimulating the peripheral circulation, ideal for people with eczema or psoriasis. Loofas are also used in Chinese medicine to treat rheumatic pain. Pieces of loofa are boiled in water and the resulting decoction is taken internally. For external use, loofa is gently heated in a sealed container for several hours until it is completely charred, then the powdered charcoal is mixed with alcohol to form a paste, applied directly to boils, rashes and blisters etc.

Loofa sponges that you buy commercially are grown from special commercial seeds, and grown under very controlled conditions. They are bred for size and strength. Home garden cultivars produce smaller, fluffier, more flexible sponges that are fine, though they won't compete with the commercial ones for density and look.

Being a tropical annual vine, loofa is frost intolerant. In the wet tropics the plants grow vigorously, but in colder climates, for best results grow them in a glass house, give them full sun, their long vigorous vines need lots of room to roam and/or a sturdy trellis to clamber over. The plant is receptive to pollen, if grown in a glass house or an area deficient of insects, needs to be artificially pollinated.

Loofa flower buds, flowers, and young green fruits are edible. In many other parts of the world, especially in Asia, they are enjoyed raw, sautéed in a little oil, sliced in a stir-fry, cooked in soup, stews, curries, or breaded and fried. Cook and eat them as you would a zucchini. Make young fruits into pickles as you would cucumbers or gherkins. The mature gourd can grow 30 to 60 cm long, and weigh up to over 1kg. Some varieties are longer, some squatter; some are preferred for eating than others, as some have a slight bitter tasting skin. The young ones usually have soft edible skin and white flesh. Seeds may be roasted, salted and eaten as a snack or pressed for oil.

While ridged loofa has pale lemony yellow flowers, smooth loofa *L. cylindrica* has striking yellow flowers, it is occasionally grown as an ornamental, a good choice on a back fence or wall, just give it plenty of room!

Different stages of loofa fruit development

