

Growing Luffa

Luffa cylindrica and *L. acutangula* (syn *L. aegyptica*)

The plant

Luffas are tender vines belonging to the cucumber family, and can be easily grown indoors or outside in a very sheltered position. They have fruits that are edible when young and green, developing a fibrous structure when mature.

Varieties and plant material

There are two species of luffa – *Luffa acutangula*, best for flavour, which looks like a fluted green barrage balloon about 28cm/10in long and *L. cylindrica*, which looks very similar to a courgette, except that the skin is smooth, shinier and fairly hard rather than slightly bristly. Both have similar leaves, deeply lobed and sprawl rather than climb, using tendrils. Individual plants have flowers of a single sex. Inside both species of luffa is a creamy flesh with many small seeds, similar to a courgette in texture and flavour.

The two species will hybridise if grown even at considerable distances apart, so if you want to save seeds it's better to only grow one species at a time. The smooth luffa tends to produce fruits in shortening days (after midsummer in the UK) while angled luffa is unaffected by day-length. At present there are no specific cultivars sold in the UK, but a range of varieties exists elsewhere, including plants with long, short or rounded fruits, and differences in length of time from seed to fruit production. Some cultivars are selected for the quality of their hard internal fibres, used for sponges, while others are grown for medicinal properties, particularly in China. 'Satiputiya' is a hermaphrodite variety.

Planting and site

Luffas need a long growing season and don't like any check in growth, so need to be started off indoors, usually in April to May. There is some evidence that soaking the seed for 24 hours in lukewarm water before sowing encourages germination.



Angled luffa fruits for sale

Emergence rates are often low even with fresh seed, so sow more than you need. Minimum germination temperatures are around 26-30°C (77-85°F) but once the seedlings have emerged this can be a little lower. Sow 2 or 3 seeds to a 12cm/4in pot and remove the weaker seedlings.

Move on to larger pots if required before hardening off and planting out in early June. If growing in containers, a 30cm/12in pot is fine for a single plant. Alternatively, you could plant two in a grow-bag.

If planting in open ground, luffas need a sunny, well-drained spot sheltered from strong winds: anywhere you can grow cucumbers outside is suitable. The plants will require support. Stout trellis or a chin-link fence is better than bamboo poles, as the plants will twine but don't climb well unless tied in regularly.

Established plants can grow to 7m/22ft but often reach less. Luffas aren't very demanding in their soil requirements, and don't need as rich a soil as other cucurbits, but once flowers appear weekly feeding with comfrey liquid can improve the fruiting. The flowers are small and yellow. We found plenty of insects visited our plants, but if you're worried the fruits aren't setting, hand pollination with a soft brush can help. Male and female flowers are carried independently on the same plant, but in poor conditions only male flowers may develop.

A well-grown luffa plant can support about 6 or 7 fruits to maturity, although as with courgettes if you keep picking the plants will continue cropping throughout the season.



Pests, weeds and diseases

Luffas are reasonably healthy but can suffer from the same problems as other cucurbits, especially powdery mildew if the weather conditions are suitable, especially during late summer with humid nights and dry soil. Watering the plants well and removing the worst affected leaves will help control the disease.

Like all cucurbits they can develop viruses, shown by lack of vigour and mottling of the leaves.

Plants grown indoors can be prone to develop spider mite infestation in hot summers.

Harvesting and storage

Pick luffas for eating when less than 30cm/12in long, as otherwise they become tough and bitter. Some seeds sold for growing in the UK may taste bitter anyway, because they are for strains selected for sponge production. Peeling and sprinkling the cut flesh with salt may help remove some of the bitterness but if you find you have one of these you might as well grow yourself a back-scrubber rather than try eating the inedible.

Should you wish to grow luffas for sponge production, wait until the skin is hard and just turning colour if you want a pale coloured sponge, or allow the gourd to turn brown if you want a dark-coloured fibre. The skin is hard but brittle so throwing the fruit hard against a brick wall or concrete path is an easy and fun way to crack it. Peel off the split skin using a sharp knife and rinse the pulp under a running tap (into a bucket, so as not to clog up the sink) until the seeds and skeleton of fibre are revealed. If this is placed in a bucket of cold water to soak for a week the remaining flesh will begin to rot and can be removed completely.

Seed saving - seeds can be teased out of the pulp and laid on kitchen paper to dry. Ripe luffa seeds are plump, oval to round and dark in colour: they will continue to ripen inside the fruit for anything up to two months when removed from the plant. Once dry they should be detached from the paper and stored in an envelope kept in a cool, dark, dry place away from mice.

This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.

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