

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

When is a cucumber not a cucumber?

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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A few years ago I tried to grow loofah sponges, but only with unrehearsed intention. In other words, I had no idea what I was doing, nor did I give the poor loofah seeds a fair chance, for they were tucked along the fence and squooshed between climbing roses that certainly did not want to be scrubbed clean and smooth. The outcome of this feeble attempt was just that—feeble. Well, to be perfectly honest, the harvest was zip, nada. That was several years ago, and as far as I can vouch for my own ineptitude, I've made no other purposeful attempts to plant loofahs.

This year I planted my entire medley of climbing vegetables, e.g., cherry tomatoes, string beans, peas, sweet peas, and cucumbers, on several structures made of chicken wire. The circular structures were four feet around by six feet high, and anchored from flopping over in the wind with 12-inch pieces of rebar woven through the chicken wire at strategic points. The seedling plants are so neat and tidy when I first plop them into the ground that I am always sure I have not planted enough. This year I resisted the urge to fill in the blank spots. Turned out that this was a good idea because I had bumper crops of everything.

Most of the inadvertently missed, therefore unpicked, cucumbers—like the dreadful missed unpicked zucchini—turned into five-foot-long baseball bats that only your chickens would adore. I

tried to keep up with the cucumber picking since I have not yet come up with a freezer recipe, and my pickling attempts so far have produced penicillin.

One afternoon I decided to bring one of the “missed unpicked” into the house to show hubby. Since I had planted several varieties of cucumbers, and this one looked slightly different, I thought he might be able to play cucumber detective. He looked at me and accusatorially asked if I had planted loofahs. “Well, no,” I defensively said. “At least I don’t remember.” (Actually, I really didn’t remember since every year I

am experimenting in the garden.) “Right, then go check the computer and see what a growing loofah looks like,” said lower management. Oops. After some research, it looks like I was holding a medium-size, healthy loofah in my hand. I hate it when I’m outsmarted—especially by lower management.

In an attempt to enhance my loofah-harvesting knowledge, I read an article on www.luffa.info/luffaharvest.htm, but I am still somewhat confused. I think the idea is to gently pick up the loofahs as they are growing. When the

weight starts to feel lighter, unlike the giant zucchini that gets heavier, loofahs are ready to pick. There were many references as to when to pick loofahs, aside from the lighter weight. Some said pick when green, some said yellow, some said when the skin is loose, and some said when the skin is not loose. Honestly, I became very confused, and ended up with large rotting loofahs.

What I ultimately figured out is that the decrease in weight is the most significant ripe indicator. To harvest, remove the seeds by cutting off one end and shaking the fruit rather fiercely or banging it along the inside of a bucket. You can also remove the seeds after the skin has been removed. There is apparently a seam on a ripe loofah, if you can find it. Peel the skin off any creative way you can figure out. Right under the skin is the loofah sponge. Let it dry in sunlight, turning as needed. The color will lighten up as it dries.

If all of this seems like a major garden challenge, just go buy a loofah sponge at a bath or health-food market.

For me, I will abide by this quote and try again next year:

“My green thumb came only as a result of the mistakes I’ve made while learning to see things from the plant’s point of view.” —H. Fred Ale

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So...which is the cucumber and which is the loofah?
Hint: The cucumber is smaller.



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Applegater booth at Applegate Grange Harvest Faire

Board members Chris Bratt and Diana Coogle enjoyed spending a sunny October day visiting with all the folks who stopped by the *Applegater* booth at the Grange Harvest Faire.

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