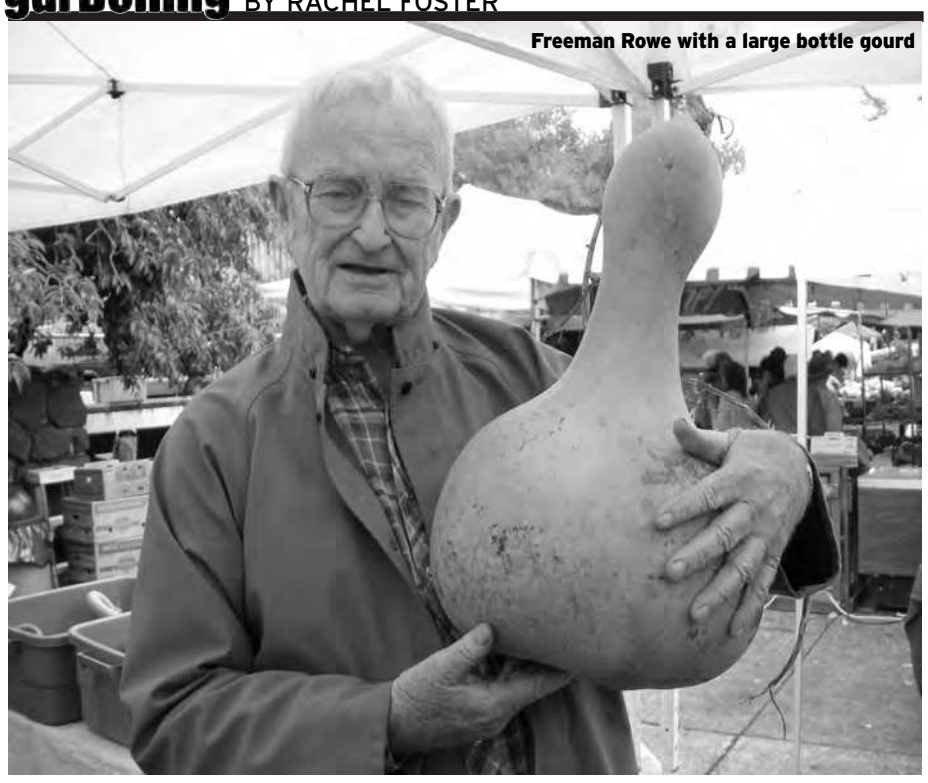
Freeman Rowe with a large bottle gourd

Good Gourd!

Yes, hard-shell beauties can be grown here.

One day this past summer I stopped to buy a few early chanterelles from the only stall at the Lane County Farmers Market that had any. I did not tip them into one of the recycled plastic bags I carry on trips to the market. I knew if I did I'd be gently rebuked by Freeman Rowe, the stall's proprietor, who says you never put mushrooms in plastic, not even just long enough to get them home. He supplies small brown bags so you don't have to.

Rowe's is the stall that displays cured, tan-colored hard-shell gourds, the kind people use for bird houses. I've always been mildly curious about his gourds, because hard-shells are tropical in origin and I didn't know they could be raised successfully in climates as cool as Eugene's. Recently, on a whim, I went online and typed in "hard-shell gourds Oregon." The sole result was a query from some land-deprived person who wondered if she could grow them in a pot on her balcony.

I stopped by the gourd and chanterelle stall again, to ask if these were indeed locally grown gourds. Rowe didn't seem surprised by the question. "When I moved here I heard that you couldn't grow and ripen hard-shell gourds. I took that as a challenge and tried some." That was about 15 years ago, and he's been growing them ever since. "I can mature all but the biggest, and that's the bushel gourd," he said. He once ripened a couple of good sized bushel gourds and thought they were mature, but they collapsed during the slow drying process.

Gourds are related to cucumbers, melons, squash, and pumpkins; they all belong in the family Cucurbitaceae. Hard-shell gourds make up the genus *Lagenaria*. They come in a great variety of shapes and sizes, and indigenous cultures around the world have used them as utensils, flotation devices and for personal adornment, most famously in Papua New Guinea as penis coverings. Whereas most 'cucurbits' have yellow flowers and bloom in the daytime like zucchini, lagenarias are distinguished by white flowers that open at night. The gourds Rowe grows and ripens range in size from whopping bottle gourds down to tiny Nigerian jewelry gourds one or two inches in diameter.

Hard-shell gourds need full sun and lots of room, Rowe says. They also need a long growing season, and if you plant them in cold, wet soils the seeds may rot before they germinate. "You need to start them inside the first week of April and set them out the last week in May." As the fruits ripen, Rowe sets them up on the flower end, "on a generous layer of newspaper. I take none off the vine until they are frozen to the ground. Ideally that would be late November, but this year it's already happened. That means I won't be able to cure all my gourds this year." He'll put them in his 'rot room,' where the good ones will dry by next summer. Those that still appear sound will be power washed, and any that survive *that* ordeal are good, strong ones!

Rowe regularly hangs gourd bird houses for birds to nest in. Gourds anywhere from five inches to a foot in diameter will suit a variety of birds. He gets violet green swallows, English sparrows (though often despised, they are industrious insect hunters, he says), chickadees and the occasional Bewick's wren. Violet greens prefer a hole (cut with a keyhole saw) one and a half inches in diameter. For the others it's an inch and a quarter. Hang gourds out of the rain, if possible, and clean them out carefully each year to thwart over-wintering parasites. Rowe uses a long handled spoon for this purpose.

Maeve Sowles, current president of Lane County Audubon Society, suggests that, in many locations, house wrens are the most likely occupants of small gourds. If you happen to live near water where there are purple martins, you might persuade those to nest as well. Sowles referred me to the website of the Purple Martin Conservation Association, which is loaded with helpful information on the topic.

Rowe adds: "People may ask where to get gourd seeds. If they have access to the Internet they should locate the American Gourd Society and they will find several places that offer seeds for sale." **EW**

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