

The Bird House Gourd Project was created by two creative Landings Garden Club members, Pat Wolters and Jean Deitch while touring Pat's backyard bird sanctuary. Pat heads the Orphan Bird Rescue on Skidaway Island and Jean is former Chair of the Club's Birds & Conservation Committee. Jean is always up for an interesting project. With approval to proceed from the Garden Club Board, Jayne Rogers, Club member and Master Gardener, joined the group and the planning began. Pat and Jayne had grown gourds in the past so the group was enthusiastic but unsure how difficult the project would be in the hot, humid climate of Coastal Georgia.

Seeds were started from both Burpee and an Ohio Amish farm and cared for indoors beginning in January 2020. In March, a plot at Skidaway Farms was prepped with compost. And forty-five 6-inch seedlings were planted in 8 rows with fencing and stakes for support. The three volunteers hand watered the plants every other day for the first month until blossoms formed on the vines. The growth was so fast and furious that the vines topped the 6-foot fence requiring additional arched fences to be added. Within a month the rapidly growing vines collapsed the arched fencing, requiring a creative support system to be added. Fertilizer was also added in May, but due to the vine's prolific growth, the group decided with the advice of Jane Kollman of Skidaway Farms to discontinue future application. By mid-June 10" gourds were growing, and by early July the stems of the bright green gourds began to brown. It was time to harvest.

The next step to turn the gourds into birdhouses was to allow the gourds to dry, lose their fleshy rind and develop a hard shell. However, the humid coastal Georgia climate was impeding the process and the group was forced to take the harvested gourds into their homes to cure in a drier climate. As the gourds dried, they changed from green plump skin to black moldy coated thin-skinned gourds.

In late September the seeds could be heard rattling around inside the gourds indicating the drying process was complete and they were dry enough for the cleaning to begin, which was also a learning and sloppy process. The best method to clean the dark moldy rind was to first use bleach and then scrub with a stainless steel scrubby in soapy water. The gourds were very fragile and broke easily, even using great care a few gourd necks broke off; which were turned into tiny vases. The seeds were collected as the holes were drilled just in case the project would be repeated.

After drying, cleaning, drying again, and painting, more gourds were lost especially during the drilling process. Holes were drilled in the top for a hanging hook, and 4 small holes were drilled in the bottom for drainage. Then using Pat's expertise, 1¼" holes were drilled for Nuthatches, Carolina Wrens and Chickadees and 1½" holes for Bluebirds. Some of the gourds developed a beautiful geometric mold pattern as they grew, those gourds were sprayed with

polyurethane to preserve nature's beauty. Others were spray painted in vibrant colors and prepared for hanging in gardens for Spring nesting. No matter the color, shape or size, they all turned out to be works of art!

The finished birdhouses were sold to Landings Garden Club members at their Fall Fling held in November. Instructions for the proper location, hanging height and maintenance were provided with each gourd birdhouse sold. Proceeds from the sale of the Birdhouses are used for the many island and community projects of the Landings Garden Club.

Looking back, the gourds were smaller than anticipated and there was no difference between seed origin. The group believes that the vines may have been pampered too much and that the gourds will grow larger and thicker if they receive less water. Also, more drying time in a less humid climate will allow a tougher more durable shell to develop, increasing a larger yield. The completed birdhouses were a bit thin shelled and the final count showed a 50% loss from the original harvest, leaving just over 30 completed gourds ready to sell. A repeat of the project is being considered in 2022 implementing the lessons learned, for a more successful outcome.

Congratulations to Jean, Pat and Jayne for receiving 1st place from the Garden Club of Georgia and Deep South Region in the Bird Award Category.

The Landings Garden Club recently received 21 different awards from the National Garden Club, Garden Club of Georgia, Deep South Region and Oleander District for their island and community projects and events in 2020. For more information on the Landings Garden Club's wide range of projects and events including membership opportunities, please see TheLandingsGardenClub.com or visit our Facebook page.

Submitted by:

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Awards Chair

The Landings Garden Club