

Curbita

Buffalo Gourd, or its scientific name *Curbita*, is an indigenous species from the squash family that grows throughout Northern Mexico, Western and Southwestern United States. The Buffalo Gourd has been found within archaeological contexts here in New Mexico dating back to the Archaic Period, about 5,000 years ago!

If you are lucky enough to live in the West then you have surely seen this plant. It grows on the side of the road all summer, sending out long green tendrils dotted with big yellow squash blossoms and small green gourds.

When young, the squash can be eaten by both animals and humans. The seeds are tasty when roasted and also contain a high amount of oil, making them a great source of fat, which is a rare and precious thing in the desert. As it ages however, the squash takes on a bitter taste and strange smell, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the “stinking gourd.”

Other than being eaten young, this plant has many other helpful and delicious traits. The root of the Buffalo gourd, as well as the fruit, contain a chemical called saponin, a chemical also found in our state plant, the Yucca. When introduced to water, saponin creates a soapy foam. The Buffalo gourd was used by Native cultures as a soap and shampoo as well as to clean fabrics.

Many Native American cultures of the Southwest and plains used Buffalo Gourd medicinally. Most of the references regarding medicinal use was for skin disorders in both humans and animals. It seems the gourds were ground and used as a poultice for various skin conditions.

The Buffalo Gourd is not only a very helpful plant, but one endemic and symbolic of American West. Here at El Rancho de las Golondrinas we have a sizable patch that grows on the hill across from the blacksmith shop every summer, as well as various other patches around the ranch.