

Orchestra grew out of backyard gourd garden

By Kathy Dixon

There are no butchers, bakers or candlestick makers, but a carpenter, a graphic designer, a photographer, a stay-at-home dad and an insurance adjuster comprise a band that successfully makes music with gourds.

The gourds are shaken, rattled, strummed, hummed, plucked and beaten. They come in the form of flutes, harps, drums and uncommon instruments like the balafon, mbira and musical bow.

They're the basis of the Richmond Indigenous Gourd Orchestra, which has been making tribal, heart-pounding and melodic music for more than a decade.

After a performance this past August at Virginia State University's Agriculture Field Day, an attendee called and "compared us to a couple of avant-garde jazz musicians who are our heroes"—Sun Ra and Charles Mingus—said band member Barry Bless. "For someone to hear that in our gourd music and make that connection means a lot."

Gourds were the first plant cultivated and were used for utensils and "prehistoric Tupperware," as well as musical instruments, said the band's founder, Arthur Stephens.

He stumbled onto the primitive looking plants after finding gourd seeds in his father's tool shed in 1985. Stephens planted the seeds to see what would grow.

What eventually developed was a gourd orchestra that now performs as many as 25 times a year.

Initially, though, "I was just growing them for the joy of growing something interesting," Stephens said.

The first seeds produced ornamental gourds like those sold around Halloween and Thanksgiving. Then Stephens discovered hard shell gourds, which are used for crafting because they have a thicker skin and are harder when they dry.

Stephens, a professional photographer, began photographing the unusual-looking gourds and continued growing them because he found it fascinating how they took over his back yard.

Then, as he listened to world music and watched the "kooky gourd lady" on "The Tonight Show" and the "Late Show With David Letterman," he started thinking about converting his gourds into instruments.

He soaked in as much information as he could from the library, Web sites and the world's largest gourd show, held each year in Ohio. "The more I looked, the more I found," Stephens said.

He started crafting instruments and, after a lot of trial and error, made some that actually produced viable sounds.

RIGO started in 1990 with 10 members, and it's now down to five—all of whom are musicians. The group has created four CDs and sells them on its Web site at www.gourdorchestra.com.

They perform throughout Virginia and have played at the Ohio Gourd Show and the Corning Glass Museum as well.

In addition to their love of music and performing, RIGO wants to encourage other people to grow unique things in small spaces to keep small-scale agriculture in Virginia.

"We're about becoming a society of producers, growers and makers rather than a society of consumers and takers," Bless said. And through its gourd music, RIGO "hopes to inspire people to do the same."

Gourd instruments get shaken, rattled, strummed, hummed, plucked and beaten by Christopher Hibben and other members of the Richmond Indigenous Gourd Orchestra, which formed in 1990.



PHOTOS BY KATHY DIXON



At a performance at Virginia State University, Hibben and John Ramsey (seated) played the balafon, while RIGO founder Arthur Stephens plucked a bass mbira.



(Left photo) Pippin Barnett played a rain stick. (Right photo) Stephens also plays a gourd lute. Initially, "I was just growing them for the joy of growing something interesting," he said of his first gourd crop.



Small spaces perfect for growing gourds

If you have a small patch of soil, you too can grow gourds.

Arthur Stephens, founder of the Richmond Indigenous Gourd Orchestra and an avid backyard gardener, suggests starting gourd plants indoors in February. He recommends letting the seeds soak overnight in water until they sprout.

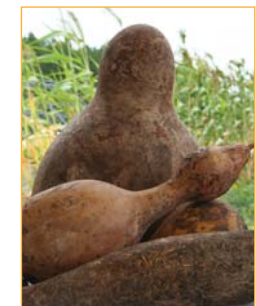
Once they sprout, they should be potted in peat pots or foam cups with holes in the bottom. They need to be kept warm and moist until they're ready to transplant outside after the last freeze.

Once in the garden, make sure the plants have plenty of sun and compost material, Stephens said.

"By July, you should have your first crop."

Stephens grows gourds in his tiny urban backyard in Richmond using bamboo trellises. But be careful, he warned, they "grow like crazy."

Band member Barry Bless agreed. "We grow gourds in South Side Richmond, and sometimes the vines grow into the neighbor's yard."



explains how gourds grow, called "Jez Grew (Like the Kudzu Do)." 🍂