

Why you need to know gourd artist Susan Zanella



Susan Zanella is an accomplished artist who specializes in decorating gourds of a variety of themes, including these holiday items. (Scott Serio / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By **Linda Burkins**
For Harford Magazine

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This Baldwin artist specializes in one unusual medium.

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Baldwin resident Susan Zanella has made a name creating art from an unlikely source — dried gourds. We talk with her about what drew her to this unusual art form.

Why gourds?

It was purely by chance. I was taking another art class with someone who works with gourds, and when she told me about it, I gave it a try. Now gourds are taking over my house.

What can you do with gourds?

Anything you can do with soft woods. They become very light inside as they dry, and the outer shell becomes very hard. You can carve shapes on them, paint them with the same paint you use for woods. My own passions are carving and pyrography [burning designs onto a surface with a heated metallic point]. With pyrography, I'm using the same tools you use to make wood burnings, but I burn the images on gourds.

What's the biggest challenge in creating art with gourds?

Believe it or not, it can be a health hazard. The gourds come out of the field covered in dirt and mold, which can be toxic. Then, as they dry out, the fibers inside the gourd can also be toxic if you inhale too much of them. I wear a respirator and goggles when I'm cutting them up and cleaning them out. I do that part out in my garage with the door wide open. It's good I don't have any neighbors close by, because I'd probably scare them.

The other challenge is finding a balance between trying to find time to make art and having to go out and sell it at shows. Sometimes you can get too stuck thinking about creating product to sell at shows. That can be a soul sucker. You wind up working on things you know will sell, not the things you really want to do. But I try to have a balance.

What are your most popular gourd items?

My leaf bowls get snatched up as soon as I make them. I also make thunder drums and ocean drums. One of them recently won "Best in Category" at the Maryland State Fair.

Where can people learn more about gourd art?

There's a whole community of gourd artists all over the world. The American Gourd Society promotes their work in the U.S. There's no chapter in Maryland, so I'm a member of the Pennsylvania chapter.

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Learn the Art

Susan Zanella will teach a class on making a decorative gourd at 6 p.m. on Monday, Dec. 7, at Harford Community College. Contact HCC's Continuing Education Division at 443-412-2376 to learn more.

To order supplies, visit gourdmarket.com, where Zanella sells her art, as well as pre-cut and cleaned gourds.

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