



Okra in the Vegetable Garden

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Program

Okra is in the Malva plant family along with hibiscus, hollyhocks, and cotton. Its big yellow flowers with a maroon center splash are very attractive. They appear in leaf axils on tall central stems that reach 4 to 6 feet. Plants become bushy as deeply lobed leaves are born on long petioles. The edible part of the plant is the immature seed pod, which is shaped like a rocket and pointed at the top.

This warm season vegetable originates from tropical Asia. Okra is used in cooking to flavor and thicken soups and gumbos, but it is primarily consumed pickled, sautéed, steamed or batter-fried. Okra prefers growing conditions similar to corn. It can be planted “on the flat” or on raised beds, depending upon watering method (drip, soaker hose, sprinkler or furrow). For the home garden okra seeds are customarily soaked for 12-24 hours in warm water and the plumped ones are planted. This speeds germination, which can take long as two weeks in the early spring, however planting dry seeds when the soil is warm, also works fine.

Seeds are planted about 1 inch deep, 6 inches apart, in rows that are 3-4 feet apart. Seedlings are eventually thinned to a spacing of 12-18 inches apart. Six to eight plants will bush out to take up 12 to 16 feet of row and provide about 15 pounds of baby okra. The plant needs room to grow tall and bushy and you need to be able to access the plant to pick the tender immature pods. Even commercial fields are hand-clipped by workers wearing cotton gloves and long sleeves. Okra plants are not pleasant to touch. Whether the spines are pronounced or hair-like, they are scratchy and irritating.

Harvest when pods are 3-4 inches long (about 4-6 days after flowering) and snip or clip every few days whether you eat the pods or not. If left unpicked, the plants will stop producing fruit. Discard or compost large pods as these are fibrous and unpalatable. At the tail end of the season the pods at the top of the plant can be left to dry and used in fall floral arrangements.



Okra forms a tap-root with support roots that are capable of growing quite deep if supplied with generous amounts of water on an infrequent basis or a continuous supply through drip irrigation. A deep root system will help support the tall crop. Provide a medium amount of fertilizer by amending soils with compost prior to planting and one or two side-dressings with moderate amounts of nitrogen (or 16-16-16) during the growing season. Over fertilization can lead to less flower and fruit production.

Every vegetable has a few potential pest problems and okra is no exception. First of all it is very susceptible to root knot nematodes, so if your soil has nematodes do not plant okra (or tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and potatoes) as populations of these devastating critters will rise and the crop will be stunted with no yield. Also keep an eye on new seedling plants when they emerge from the soil as cutworms and earwigs can chew through these tender stems quite quickly. During the growing season aphids, worms, and plant bugs can be problematic, but no worse than in other vegetables.

The tried and true variety is Clemson Spineless, which is open-pollinated and has been grown commercially as well as in the home garden for over 40 years. Its dark green pods are slightly grooved and plants grow 4-5 feet tall. Clemson Spineless 80 is a newer selection that is slightly shorter and has better plant uniformity. Annie Oakley is a very prolific hybrid with bright green pods, shorter still, and nearly double the yield. Other varieties are Burgundy, Emerald, and Cajun Delight.

Okra is a rather delicate vegetable and has the same general storage requirements as green beans, eggplant and summer squash. Other common names for this vegetable are Gumbo, Ladyfinger, and Bhindi.

May 17, 2012