



Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

Okra: Growing a Veggie that Has an Acquired Taste

by Dana Young, UC Master Gardener

Okra is one of those plants that most people have strong opinions about—they either love it or hate it. I love it! My family and I are from Arkansas, so we ate it quite a lot in the summertime. As you can imagine, I was excited to see it growing in the small courtyard of a home I visited in the Katmandu Valley of Nepal a few years ago.

Okra is in the mallow family. It is closely related to cotton, hollyhock and hibiscus to name a few. I know that when our local farmers are planting cotton, the weather conditions are perfect for planting okra. Like cotton, okra loves hot weather. This type of plant likes it best when nights are in the 60's and the days are 85 degrees or warmer.



Okra blossom and fruit

Unlike so many other plants, you get a big bang for your buck when growing okra since it holds its high price even at its peak. While even one plant is worth growing for apartment dwellers, I usually allow two plants per person and a few extra plants for sharing. The okra fruit tend to lose quality after a few days, so picked fresh is best.

Okra benefits from a generous amount of compost or other rich organic matter, which should be thoroughly mixed with the soil prior to planting. Soak the seed overnight in warm water to speed up germination and use seeds that have swollen slightly as they are most likely to germinate. Since most varieties grow to about six feet high, the plants should be thinned 18-24 inches apart in rows about 4 feet apart. Six plants can be grown in a 4x4 growbox. Another option for those with limited space is to grow them in large pots, one plant per pot. Be sure to plant okra in an area that gets lots of sun and has good drainage.



Clemson spineless okra

General care for your okra plants include starting with a preplant fertilizer when planting. They should be fed twice during the growing season with a complete fertilizer, once when pods set and again when the plants are shoulder high. Be sure to keep them weed-free as plants do not like to compete for nutrients, air and water. They like deep watering with a drying out (not too dry) period between watering, as okra doesn't like "wet feet." In fact, okra can handle some drought as compared to other vegetables, but to ensure good growth and production you will need to water at least an inch a week. If you run into an extended dry period (like a short vacation), okra will be the last of your vegetables to suffer.

Then comes the good part! From the time the plants are a little over a foot tall, about 60 days, you will see okra appear. From this time until the cold sets in, you will get pods. Okra forms up the stalk as it grows and then it forms on side branches. Okra is a "cut and come again" veggie. Keep cutting the pods every day or two, and they will keep on coming. Once you quit picking, the plants will stop producing. Okra is best when picked at

3-5 inches in length. Some varieties, such as Texas Long Horn, grow nearly 10 feet tall and produce pods often 10 inches long! The most common variety grown is Clemson Spineless. For color, I recommend the burgundy type, which has red leaves and pods.

Okra is relatively pest-free, but sometimes it has problems with aphids, corn earworms and mites, all of which can be controlled with chrysanthemum based insecticides called pyrethrums or with a soap-based insecticide. Both must be applied directly on the insect, so do not use these unless you see actual insects on your plants. Stinkbugs can be handpicked, if you see any.

At 25 calories per half cup, serving okra is a healthy winner. It can be batter fried, added to stews, steamed, sautéed or pickled. I hope you acquire a taste for growing, eating and enjoying it as much as I do.

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