

## Okra-- Easy to Grow, Good to Eat

By Susan Camp

Many summers ago, my husband and I grew four okra plants in our garden. One morning, I discovered two small, green okra pods. I picked them and a few days later, I had four. I picked them, then I had eight, then sixteen, well, you get the idea. Pretty soon the refrigerator and freezer were packed with bags of okra, enough to last all winter.

We decided to plant okra this summer. The harvest has begun, and we are excited. Sliced, dipped in buttermilk, dredged in cornmeal and fried to golden perfection, okra is a summertime culinary pleasure.

The okra plant has a long history of use in cooking. Originating somewhere in North or East Africa, okra probably was brought to North America by African slaves in the early 1800's, but was noted in Brazil a century earlier. The vegetable is featured in African, Middle Eastern North and South American, Caribbean, and Asian cuisine. Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is a member of the mallow family, along with hibiscus, and its lovely blossom resembles the hibiscus flower. Other colloquial names for okra include bamia or banya, gumbo, and lady's fingers.

The okra plant is a tall, upright, tender annual, reaching a height of six feet. Popular varieties include 'Clemson Spineless' and 'Lee'. Dwarf varieties like 'Annie Oakley II Hybrid' and 'Jambalaya Hybrid' grow to about three feet. 'Red Burgundy' pods will turn green during cooking.

Plant okra seeds in the spring once the soil temperature reaches 65 degrees F. Soaking seeds in warm water overnight to crack the seed coat will hasten germination. Freezing the seed before planting will also break the seed case. Okra requires well-drained sandy loam and full sun, with a pH of 6.0 to 7.5. The lovely, creamy-white blossom with a deep burgundy throat lasts a single day, then closes and drops.

Harvest the immature pods in 60 to 70 days, when they are about two to four inches long. Mature pods are too fibrous and tough for eating, but can be used in flower arrangements and for craft projects. Remove mature pods so they don't hinder further production. Since okra is self-pollinating, you can allow a few pods to mature on the plant until they are dry to save seeds for next year, although production will be decreased. Okra will continue to bear until the first frost. Freeze harvested pods or store in plastic bags in the refrigerator for 7-10 days. Keep the stored pods dry to prevent discoloration and sliminess.

Most diseases of okra are fungal. Damping off of seedlings occurs in cold soil. Southern blight attacks the plant base. Verticillium and fusarium wilts are caused by fungi in the soil. Using disease free seed and rotating crops are the best preventatives.

Insect pests include aphids, which can be controlled by ladybird beetles. Stinkbugs and leaf-footed bugs attack the okra pods, leaving them misshapen. Contact the Gloucester Master Gardener Help Line at (804) 693-2602 on Thursdays from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. or talk to a Master Gardener at the Gloucester Main Library on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. for pesticide information. Root-knot nematodes cause root galls. Other insect pests include Japanese beetles, which attack the leaves and corn earworms, which invade the pods.

Okra is used in gumbos, soups, and stir fries, and can be pickled and canned. Some people dislike okra for its sliminess when cooked. The slime is mucilage and contains soluble fiber. Stir-frying or frying minimizes the mucilage, as does keeping the pods intact in cooking.

Okra provides 30 calories per 100 grams and is a rich source of fiber. Okra provides healthy amounts of Vitamins A, B-complex, C, and K, folic acid, as well as iron, calcium, magnesium, and manganese.

Clemson University Extension publication HGIC 1313 “Okra” and the University of Arkansas Home Gardening Series publication “Okra” provide information on growing and harvesting this interesting, flavorful vegetable.

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