

OKRA

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

Okra, *Abelmoschus esculentus*, is a warm season vegetable of the mallow family and is related to cotton, hibiscus, and hollyhock. Gumbo not only refers to the famous Cajun soup, but is a nickname for okra. Okra has a slimy, mucilaginous quality that makes it an important ingredient in sauces and stews. Okra is rich in calcium, iron, and potassium.

Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of okra available that differ in days till maturity, height, and pod color, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Annie Oakley II (early, dwarf plant)
- Burgundy (red pods)
- Clemson Spineless (spineless, compact plant)
- Emerald (early, tall plants)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

Okra is a warm season vegetable and performs poorly in cool, wet weather.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in early to late May. Soaking the seeds for 24 hours prior to planting speeds the germination process. Seeds should be planted no more than 1 inch deep and about 2 inches apart with 2-3 feet between rows. Once the seedlings emerge, they can be thinned to a spacing of about 1 foot. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Okra seeds should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Okra is fairly drought tolerant and cannot tolerate waterlogged soil.

Okra can be plagued by aphids, which can be controlled with insecticidal soaps (be sure to follow product labels). Stink bug damage on pods appears as wart-like growths.

Chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin can be used to control an infestation of green stink bugs or an inorganic insect spray such as Sevin will control brown and green stink bugs.

To prevent verticillium and fusarium wilt, plant seeds in a raised bed to improve soil drainage. Damage by root knot nematodes can be avoided by rotating okra with other crops each year.

Harvesting

Okra pods should be harvested when they are 2-4 inches long. Plants should be checked every other day to keep up with maturing pods. Pods can quickly turn woody. If they are not easily cut by a knife, they are probably too old to eat. Plants will continue to produce if mature pods are removed. Okra plants have fine hairs that can irritate skin causing a rash, so long sleeves and gloves should be worn to provide adequate protection while harvesting.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) and Stokes (1-800-263-7233, stokesseeds.com) are two companies that sell okra varieties.