

## Okra Lives Up the Summer Garden

by Margene Whitler Hucek



**L**IKE MANY people, my first encounter with stewed okra left me unimpressed. But that changed when, on a trip to New Orleans, friends persuaded me to try shrimp gumbo. The zesty dish—with no hint of the slime some people find objectionable—made a fan of me and I’ve been growing and cooking okra ever since.

Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is a semi-tropical annual primarily grown for its edible seedpods. A close relative of mallow family members such as hibiscus, it is ornamental enough to be planted in a mixed border. In addition to a pleasing upright, branching habit, it has attractive leaves and its large, hollyhocklike flowers are creamy white or yellow with crimson centers. Even the upright seedpods are decorative, especially on the varieties that have red or burgundy ones.



Okra pods, such as these of ‘Jambalaya’, top, should be picked while they are tender. Above: Okra flowers resemble those of hollyhocks.

### GROWING GUIDELINES

Okra is a warm-season vegetable that can be grown successfully in any climate where sweet corn grows. As few as six plants will provide enough okra for most home culinary purposes.

If you live in an area with a short growing season, choose varieties like ‘Jambalaya’ that mature early and start seeds indoors in biodegradable pots six weeks before the last-frost date. Always wait until the soil warms to at least 60 degrees Fahrenheit before planting either your okra seedlings or direct seeding in the garden. Germination can take up to three weeks, but nicking the seed coats with nail clippers and soaking seeds overnight will speed things up.

Keep in mind that okra is a branching plant that needs a lot of space; crowded plants produce fewer pods. It will grow most vigorously in loamy, free-draining

## Sources

**Park Seed Company**, Hodges, SC.  
(800) 845-3369.  
[www.parkseed.com](http://www.parkseed.com).

**Seed Savers Exchange**, Decorah, IA.  
(563) 382-5990. [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org).

**Territorial Seed Company**, Cottage Grove, OR. (800) 626-0866.  
[www.territorialseed.com](http://www.territorialseed.com).

soil enriched with compost. Apply a balanced fertilizer such as fish emulsion at planting time, then sidedress with liquid fertilizer or compost every three to four weeks during the growing season to increase production. Water regularly during periods without rainfall.

## PESTS AND DISEASES

Pests and diseases are seldom a problem with okra, though aphids can become a nuisance. Insecticidal soap or a strong jet of water is an effective control. Stinkbugs can cause misshapen pods, so remove these pests by hand and drop them into a jar of soapy water to kill them. (You don't want to crush them because they will release an offensive odor.)

If your okra leaves suddenly turn yellow and wilt, the plant may be infected with fusarium wilt, a soil-borne disease. Dig up and destroy any infected plants immediately, and plant okra in a different location the following year, as you should be doing anyway as part of a regular crop rotation. The plants are also extremely sensitive to cold, wet weather; in my Virginia garden, I wait until early July to plant okra in a bed that previously hosted a cool-season crop of peas or lettuce.

## RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

**'Clemson Spineless'** is an open-pollinated variety that was a 1939 All-America Selections winner. The vigorous, four-foot-tall plants produce light green, smooth pods beginning about 60 days after planting.

**'Hill Country Red'** produces green pods tinged with red, 60 to 70 days after planting, that are excellent for pickling. This robust heirloom variety reaches six feet tall.

**'Jambalaya'** is an early-maturing selection ideal for gardeners with a short growing season. It produces an abundance of meaty, dark green pods on compact plants beginning about 50 days after planting.

## PLANTING BASICS

**Getting Started** Plant outdoors when soil temperatures are above 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Or start indoors six weeks before last-frost date and transplant into warm soil.

**Spacing** Sow seeds one inch deep and four inches apart. Thin shorter varieties to 12 to 15 inches apart and taller varieties to 18 to 24 inches apart. Space rows three to four feet apart, depending on cultivar.

**Days to Maturity** 48 to 80 days depending on cultivar. Pick pods while small and tender, between three to six days after flowering.



Okra is a branching plant that needs full sun and ample room to grow and produce the best harvest.

**'Red Burgundy'** yields dark purplish red, tender, six-inch-long pods on four-foot plants starting 55 to 60 days after planting. Its creamy-yellow flowers add to the show. **'Silver Queen'**, another heirloom variety, produces pale green, seven-inch-long pods about 70 to 80 days after planting and can reach six feet tall.

## ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Pods mature quickly so check plants every two to three days once production begins. Wear gloves and a long-sleeved shirt and use a sharp knife or clippers when harvesting okra because even the so-called spineless varieties can irritate skin on contact. Pick pods when tender and immature, usually two to

three inches long in most varieties, although some of the long-podded types remain tender until pods are six or seven inches long.

If you leave pods on the plant too long they become tough and overall production is reduced. Okra will continue producing until frost but if I end up with a few over-mature, inedible pods toward the end of the season, I allow them to dry on the plant to use in fall flower arrangements.

Okra is best cooked within a day or two of harvest, but will keep in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for a week. If you have an abundance, they can be pickled, canned, or frozen. The flowers, which are also edible, have a mild, slightly sweet flavor. They can be stuffed or battered and deep-fried. They also make a beautiful garnish for summer platters.

Okra is rich in fiber, folate, and vitamins C and K, but it also contains a mucilaginous substance that some find objectionable. Adding tomatoes to okra helps reduce the sliminess, as does steaming them whole, or frying them quickly over high heat. Conveniently, okra matures in late summer, when there is an abundance of onions, tomatoes, and peppers to combine into gumbos.

For adding punch to your late summer garden, okra won't disappoint. At a time other plants are beginning to fade, it will just be coming into its own—providing both ornamental and culinary fireworks with its lovely flowers and plentiful pods.



An ornamental edible, 'Red Burgundy' has colorful stems and seedpods.

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