

How to grow okra

Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*)

Family: Malvaceae (Mallow)

Season: Warm

Ease of growing: Easy

Nutrient needs: Medium

Water needs: Low

Common propagation: Transplant

Seed facts

Germination temperatures: 60°F to 105°F

Germination time: 5 to 10 days

Viability: 4 to 5 years

Direct sow: June

Transplants

Weeks to grow transplant: 5 to 7

Start: late April to May

Plant out: June to July

Planning facts

Spacing: 12" in 24" to 36" rows

Plants per square foot: 1

Days to harvest: 40 to 70 days from transplants; 80 to 90 days from seed.

General

Okra, or gumbo, is a popular warm season vegetable in the South, but also can be successfully grown in Michigan. Plants grow from 3 to 7 feet, depending on variety and climate. They produce attractive red to yellow blossoms that resemble hibiscus flowers. Fruits can be used in sauces or pickled to produce a tasty snack.

Preparation and planting

Okra is not difficult to grow, but it does require warm weather to thrive. It will not grow well during cool, wet, cloudy summers. Any well drained soil with a pH of 6 to 8 will support okra. Water only to keep the soil from drying out.

Major pests

Insects: Aphids and corn earworm.

Diseases: Verticillium wilt, Pythium, Phytophthora.

Other: Nematodes.

Harvesting and storage

Start picking when pods are no more than 2 to 3 inches long – this takes about five days from flowering. If you allow pods to develop to their full size, the plant will stop producing. The smaller pods should also be soft. As they get larger, they will become tough, fibrous and unfit for green use. For a continuous harvest, pick the pods every three days. Remove pods by cutting to avoid disturbing the roots.

Contact with the okra plant causes some people to develop a burning itch. To avoid that unpleasant possibility, avoid touching the plant until after the morning dew has dried, and wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants and gloves.

Use freshly harvested okra immediately for best results. Cook quickly with the caps on if you want to avoid releasing the mucilaginous interior.

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