

Okra

If you are one that loves okra, you'll surely want to grow it in your garden. It's a beautiful plant on its own, tall with striking yellow flowers, which will consistently yield okra pods from the height of summer until the late fall.

Planting:

Okra is best direct seeded in warm weather, about two weeks after the last frost. Plant seeds ½ inch deep and 4 inches apart, in rows that are 24 inches apart. Hard seed coat can be softened by soaking in buttermilk or weak vinegar solution for 24 hours or by scratching the seed coat with a file or rasp. Once the plants are 4 inches tall, thin them to 12 inches between each plant. If you live in very cold weather, okra can be started indoors and transplanted in early summer. Once the transplant is 5 inches tall, transplant in rows 12 inches apart.

Cultivation:

- **Fertilizing**- Heavy feeder. Needs a continuous supply of nitrogen for prolonged pod set. Side-dress at least one time.
- **Watering** - Okra is somewhat drought hardy, but additional watering may be needed in very hot and dry conditions.
- **Weeding**- Maintain a weed-free bed and apply an organic mulch to maintain soil moisture.
- **Special Directions** - When plants are 24 inches tall, pinch off the growing points to promote branching to increase yields.

Harvesting:

After the first of the yellow flowers come and go, the plants will start producing pods to be harvested. Harvesting may be the most difficult part of growing okra. The pods are only good when they are young and tender, older pods will get tough and woody. Harvest okra three times a week, continually cutting the pods at their base. If you find pods that you previously missed, cut them off and compost them because maturing pods will slow down production. Be sure to be harvesting the pods and not the unopened flower buds.

Storage and Preservation:

Because you'll be continually harvesting okra, storage is very important. Keep the okra pods unwashed in a paper bag in your refrigerator drawer, and make sure you are using the oldest first. Okra will keep for up to a week if stored correctly. It can also be frozen by washing and trimming the stems and blanching for 3 minutes the put into ice water. Drain and spread on trays and put into a freezer. Once frozen, transfer the okra to a freezer bag.

Nutrition:

Source of Vitamin C, folate, magnesium and fiber

Preparation & Use:

Choose firm pods and boil, fry or pickle. Okra is typically breaded and fried, but this is not always the most healthy way to enjoy okra. Try stewing it with onions and tomatoes in a gumbo, served over rice.

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