

Growing sweet corn at home



Chris Rusch
Master Gardener

Question: Can you give me some information on growing corn in my home garden?

Answer: Corn (*Zea mays*) is a cereal in the grass family. The subject of corn is huge. Books have been written about it and movies have been made.

It is by far the largest crop grown in the United States. Corn fuels cars, becomes plastic and fattens pigs and cows. More than 2,000 grocery store items are sweetened with corn syrup.

Corn is one of our iconic foods.

The story of this humble yet handy starch begins thousands of years ago in Mexico, with the domestication of an ancient grass called teosinte. Maize domestication happened in the Balsas River Valley of south-central Mexico.

Around 9,000 years ago, early farmers in this region began selecting for favorable traits of teosinte, which looks very different from modern corn and is not particularly palatable; its cob is small and its few kernels are surrounded by a tough casing.

But with human intervention, teosinte evolved into tasty, tender corn, which was subsequently carried to other parts of the Americas. By the time of European colonization in the 15th century, corn was a major food source throughout many parts of the region.

It was one of the first foods American settlers learned to grow.

Growing backyard corn can seem really challenging. But, with a few tricks, you can have more than an epic bounty that will make you feel like a legitimate farmer.

First, full sun and good

drainage are a must. Compost and turn your planting space well before you plan to sow seeds. Work in a complete organic fertilizer and finished compost to a depth of 8-10 inches. Check levels of lime and amend as necessary as limey soil contributes to high yields.

Like other grasses, corn needs a lot of nitrogen so a fertilizer like 7-5-5 would be especially valuable. Because nitrogen is not available in cooler soil, a shot of fish emulsion when plants are young is also helpful. Corn is a heavy feeder requiring large amounts of nitrogen during the vegetative stages.

Corn is pollinated by the wind. Corn is monoecious, meaning a corn plant has both male (tassels) and female (silks and ear) flowers. Pollen from the tassels needs to land on the silks in order to create a good crop.

Corn kernels form when pollen reaches the fine corn silks at the top of the growing husked ears. Each silk is connected to a kernel and needs to complete pollination to develop.

Planting corn in blocks rather than one single row ensures proper full pollination. Picture it as your own little corn field.

Water your corn plants evenly and deeply; dry corn will make for poor yields. In the seedling stage, watering should be spread out over several days; in later growth stages, one deep watering per week is sufficient.

Avoid overhead watering when tassels are dropping pollen as this will reduce pollination. Mulch rows with compost or straw to help retain moisture. Keep rows free of weeds as they compete with your corn and may harbor pests.

Frequent, light cultivation with a hoe is the best approach to proactive weed management.

For a continuous supply of corn, plant early and late varieties in your first planting. An example would be planting



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

Full sun and good drainage are a must for successfully growing sweet corn in your home garden. Ears are ready when the silks are completely dry and brown.

varieties such as Sugar Buns (70-80 days); Bodacious (80-90 days); and Golden Jubilee (90-105 days). Plant these three varieties at the same time and enjoy an abundance of corn for about a month!

Under normal conditions each stalk will yield one ear; under good conditions it will yield two, with the second ear being the smaller and later to appear. Ears are ready when the silks are completely dry and brown.

Pick ears early in the morning when the temperature is at its coolest. The ears should be cooled as quickly as possible and stored at 36 degrees. Sugars will be rapidly converted to starch if the ear matures on the plant past the milk stage.

Although varieties may differ in how fast the sugar to starch conversion takes place, in general, sweet corn needs to be eaten or processed shortly after harvest.

Sweet corn ears can be roasted whole, shucked

and steamed, or shucked and boiled. Sweet corn can also be processed by cutting kernels off the cob and canning or freezing them alone, or in combination with other vegetables.

Sweet corn is high in dietary fiber content, contributing to digestive health. It also provides essential minerals like zinc, magnesium, iron, copper and manganese. Corn is gluten-free and an excellent source of vitamin A.

Like all vegetables,

those plants with darker or brighter colors (like yellow or blue corn) have greater nutritional value.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.