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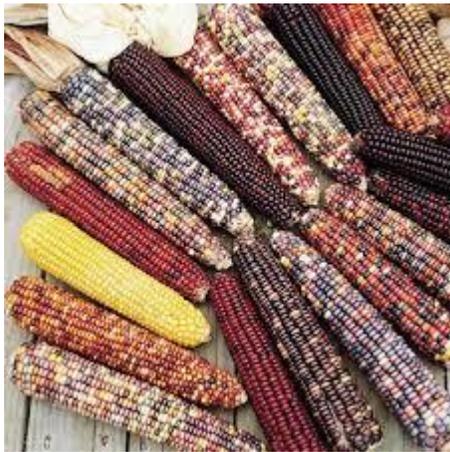
*A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach*

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**For Immediate Release**

## **Ornamental Corn: A Popular Fall Decoration**

*Beth Ellen Doran, Iowa Master Gardener*

Fall is here, and with it comes a spectacular palette of colors found in autumn leaves, pumpkins, gourds and yes, even corn. While farmers harvest fields of corn, I too am busy harvesting ornamental corn that graces one edge of my backyard garden.



Maybe it's the farmer in me, but I enjoy growing ornamental corn and am excited when peeling back the husk to find magnificent colors – blues, reds, pinks, golds and multi-colored kernels. But, aside from kernel color, there is also a wide variety in ear size, husk and stalk color. Ear sizes range from none to miniature to large. Miniature varieties have become very popular for indoor decorating. Other cultivars with red or purple stalks and leaves are used for outside decorating.

Growing ornamental corn is similar to growing sweet corn. There are a couple of things I have learned from experience. A prolonged, dry period can reduce pollination and ear fill, as well as ear tip fill. To avoid this, the gardener needs to provide an inch of water weekly until the silks have dried down and ears are fully developed. My solution for poorly developed ears is to put

them out for the rabbits and squirrels and watch them feast away!

Ornamental corn should be harvested by hand when the shuck is dry and the ears have lost their green color. To harvest, break off the ear with a quick downward motion, being careful to avoid damaging the ear or husk attached to it. To dry the ears, I like to carefully peel the shuck back and hang each ear by a piece of twine wrapped around the base of the shuck. The ear should be allowed to dry – usually one week – prior to using it in decorating. If hanging is not possible, the ears can be spread in a shallow pile to dry. Regardless of whether the corn is hung or piled, the area needs to be dry and well-ventilated.



Sometimes harvest is not always ideal. If you have to harvest ears earlier or wetter than desired, pull the husk back to allow the ear to dry quickly and prevent mold development. And, there may be times when the shuck is too dry and it tends to pull off or break from the ear. If this happens, wait for a humid or rainy day before peeling back the husks.

Most of us think of ornamental corn as a fall decoration, but it is actually multi-purpose. Ornamental corn can be used for roasting ears, but it is not as sweet as sweet corn. Ornamental corn can also be ground for corn meal or a nutritious flour. And when winter replaces fall, leftover ornamental corn provides a banquet for the wildlife in your back yard. But for me – I like to hang it up outside, sit in my lawn chair, sip a glass of apple cider and enjoy the sights and sounds of fall. Whatever you choose to do, have fun with your ornamental corn!

- 30 -

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