



CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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For Immediate Release

Keys for Success with Okra

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Looking for a new vegetable this year? Try okra! Although widely seen in the South, it can be grown in northern climates; but there are some keys for success.

Okra, which is native to Africa, belongs to the Mallow family, which includes cotton, hollyhocks and hibiscus. It performs best in well-drained, fertile soils and needs full sun. Okra can tolerate dry conditions, and during dry periods, deep watering every seven-to-ten days should be adequate.

Iowa State University horticulturalists recommend four varieties for Iowa:

- Annie Oakley II – hybrid, spineless, dark green pods, 4½-foot tall plants.
- Burgundy – open pollinated, burgundy red pods, 4-foot tall plants.
- Cajun Delight – hybrid, spineless, dark green pods, 4-foot tall plants.
- Clemson Spineless – open pollinated, spineless, dark green pods, 4- to 5-foot tall plants.

Because okra prefers warm temperatures, plant it in late May or when the air temperature has reached at least 60 degrees. Prior to sowing the seed, soak it overnight to speed germination. Due to the size of the plant, grow the seedlings in rows three feet apart and thinned to 18-24 inches apart within the row.



Okra Clemson Spineless Photo Courtesy of All-America Selections

Okra should be harvested when the pods are 2-4 inches long, using a sharp knife or shears. The pods grow rapidly, so harvest at least every other day. Do not let it mature as the pods and stems will be tough and hard to cut. One other tip – because okra plants have stiff hairs that may irritate your skin during harvest, wear gloves and long sleeves when harvesting the pods.

There are a number of ways to use okra. In the South, it is widely used in gumbos and stews. It can be boiled and served with butter, salt and pepper. However, boiled okra has a slimy texture. My two favorite ways to prepare okra are pickled or fried.

To prepare fried okra, wash the pods and cut into ½ inch pieces. I like to use a breading of corn meal, salt and pepper. Make sure your oil is hot before adding the breaded pieces to it. Fry until the pieces are golden brown. Once fried, place the pods on a plate lined with paper towel to allow excess oil to drain. Enjoy!

Because of okra's rapid growth in the summer, it is difficult to eat all of it as a fresh product; however, it can be frozen and fried later. To do this, wash and cut the pods. Apply the breading and spread a single layer of the cut pieces on a cookie sheet. Put this in the freezer. Once frozen, store the okra in freezer bags until ready to use. To fry this product, remove the frozen okra from the freezer when the oil is hot. Do not let it thaw at room temperature.

Two other positives with okra – the beautiful flowers and the mature pods. These pods can be painted and used in fall and winter arrangements. Experiment and have fun with your okra!

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