

Guide To Commercial Okra Production

Okra is a heat-loving plant whose history can be traced to the Nile basin in Egypt where Egyptians have cultivated it for centuries, according to accounts of the crop in the thirteenth century. Okra spread through North Africa from the Nile basin and on to the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and India, spreading to the New World from Brazil and Dutch Guiana. African slaves brought okra to North America by way of New Orleans. By 1781, the crop was familiar as far north as Philadelphia.

Today, the major centers for okra production are in the southeastern United States—Texas, Georgia, Florida, California, Tennessee, and Alabama—because of the sensitivity of okra to cold temperatures. In Alabama, production of okra is scattered throughout the state.

Planting Recommendations

General recommendations. Okra is a tender vegetable that cannot tolerate low temperatures for very long—and frosts are deadly. The optimum temperature range for growth is 70° to 86°F, with minimum temperatures of 64°F and a maximum of 95°F. Although okra is highly resistant to drought, it still requires considerable water for optimum growth and yield.

Soil. Okra grows best in well-drained sandy loam soils with high levels of organic matter (pH 5.8 to 6.5). It is difficult to achieve good stands when directly sowing seed in heavy clays. Be sure to choose a well-drained soil, since poorly drained soils may result in drowning of the plants.

Crop rotation. Okra is very susceptible to damage from nematodes.

To prevent a build-up of nematode populations, follow a crop rotation using corn or grass crops. Okra should not follow other crops that are highly susceptible to nematodes such as squash and sweetpotatoes, which tend to increase nematode populations. To determine the nematode population in your field or garden, collect a soil or root sample and have it analyzed for nematodes by a reputable laboratory. Samples should be taken in late summer, prior to spring planting. Contact your county Extension agent for more information on how to sample for nematodes and for suggestions on control.

Time of planting. Do not plant okra into cold soils. Soil temperatures should be between 70° to 95°F for optimal germination. The earliest that okra should be planted in South Alabama is from April 1 to 15; in Central Alabama from April 15 to 30; in North Alabama from May 1 to 15.

Seeding rate and spacing. Prepare the land to ensure establishment of a uniform stand. Turn the soil in the fall or early spring so crop residues can decompose before the okra is planted. Early land preparation also allows time for weed seed to germinate, allowing for early cultivation to destroy young weeds.

Seed the okra to produce stands with plants spaced 12 to 15 inches apart within the row (spacings can be closer when using semi-dwarf varieties) and 2 to 3 feet between rows. Seeds should be planted to a depth of ½ to 1 inch. To achieve the maximum stand, plant three to four seeds per foot and thin to desired spacing. Seeding at this rate will require 6 to 10 pounds of seed per acre. Soaking seed in water overnight helps hasten germination. Transplants will en-

hance earliness. Transplant at the three- to four-leaf stage with a 12-inch in-row spacing.

Before planting, soil test each field to determine the correct fertility. Follow the recommendations from the analysis to prevent excessive plant vigor and poor yield. If no soil test is made, a general recommendation is to apply 30 pounds of nitrogen, 60 to 80 pounds of phosphorus (P₂O₅), and 60 to 80 pounds of potassium (K₂O) per acre. Sidedress with 25 pounds of nitrogen when plants are 6 to 8 inches tall and again 2 to 3 weeks later.

Maintaining a balance between foliage production and pod (or fruit) production is necessary for maximum yield. Avoid using extra nitrogen on vigorous plants until fruiting begins to check plant growth. Otherwise, plants will produce a lot of foliage with little flowering and subsequent fruit production.

Regardless of irrigation method, be sure to provide about 1 inch of water to the crop per week. Producing okra on dry (non-irrigated) land can be risky. Ensuring sufficient water to developing plants will produce good yields of high-quality pods.

Varieties

'Clemson Spineless' is a uniform spineless variety with medium dark green, angular pods requiring 55 to 58 days to reach maturity.

'Emerald' is a spineless variety with dark green, smooth, round pods, requiring 58 to 60 days to reach maturity. 'Emerald' is used primarily for processing.

'Lee' is a spineless, semi-dwarf variety with deep bright green, straight, angular pods, requiring 55 to 58 days to reach maturity.

Guide To Commercial Okra Production Aces

Sebastian Brünink



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