

Okra

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Okra is a warm-season crop that belongs to the mallow family and is related to hibiscus. It originates from northern Africa and goes by many different names. The word gumbo is believed to originate from one of those names. This dish is an example of how okra has been widely adopted in southern cooking. There are many varieties of okra, but dwarf plants without spines and with smooth, green pods are recommended for home gardens.

Planting

- The range of planting dates for okra varies depending on what region of Kentucky they are grown in:
 - April 20 to August 1 for western KY
 - May 10 to July 15 for central KY
 - May 15 to July 1 for eastern KY
- Before planting, soak seeds in warm water for at least 6 hours, but for no more than 12 hours.
- Plant seeds directly into the soil at a depth of 1 inch.
- If starting as transplants, start seeds 6 weeks before the desired planting date.
- Recommended plant spacing is 1-foot apart in rows that are spaced 24-to-30 inches apart. You can reduce row spacing by alternating which row you plant in.
- Most varieties are tall bush variety but some can be climbers. Using a trellis on these may save space in the garden.



Care and Harvest

- Plant in a weed-free area.
- Keep the area around the plant weed-free.
- Keep an eye out for aphids, blister beetles, and Japanese beetles. Treat accordingly when pests appear.
- Remove any dead leaves from the garden. If they are not diseased, you can compost the leaves.
- Okra should get 1 inch of water a week, including rain.
- Okra is ready to harvest 50-to-80 days after planting, usually in late September to early November. Harvest when fruit are between 2-to-4 inches long. The harvest date and the length of the fruit depend on the variety of okra that is selected.
- Twist and snap or cut the stem to harvest.

Storage and Use

- Okra can be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week, loosely wrapped in perforated plastic bag.
- To freeze okra, blanch small pods for 3 minutes and large pods for 4 minutes. Once cooled, it can be frozen whole or cut.
- To pickle okra, wash and trim stem ends to ¼ inch. Okra can be pickled in a boiling water bath. Head space and boil times vary by recipe.
- Okra can be eaten raw if one can handle a gel texture. If not, they can be fried or boiled.



RECIPES

Okra Fritters

Adapted from the Stacy Little recipe

Combine in a medium bowl:

- 2 cups okra, caps removed, coarsely chopped
- ½ cup onion, minced
- ½ cup white or yellow cornmeal, not coarse (or all purpose flour)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced (optional)
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt (or to taste)
- ½ teaspoon black pepper (or to taste)

Toss until okra and onions are coated with dry ingredients.

Combine in a small bowl:

- ¼ cup buttermilk (or water)
- 1 egg

Add to okra mix and stir in. Heat in a large, nonstick skillet over medium to medium-high heat until hot.

- 3 tablespoons oil

Scoop ¼ cup portions of the fritter mixture into the skillet and flatten. Fry until golden brown for about 4 minutes, then flip and fry for 4 more minutes, until both sides are brown and crisp. Drain on paper towels and serve warm. Serve with the dipping sauce of your choice.

To prevent okra from getting slimy:

- Freeze it before cutting.
- Soak the okra in 1 quart of water and 1 cup of cider vinegar for an hour before cooking, then rinse and pat dry.
- Sauté, roast, or blanch the okra before adding it to the dish.

References

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