

Okra

Traditionally grown in the South, where it's sometimes called gumbo, okra requires temperatures well above 60 degrees and a well- drained, fertile soil. Its elongated seedpods are excellent additions to soups and stews, or they can be cooked and served on their own.

Varieties

Tall varieties, such as 'Clemson Spineless,' may grow to 4 feet. They make attractive garden hedges, with handsome foliage and showy, yellow, hibiscuslike flowers. Shorter varieties, such as 'Dwarf Green Long Pod,' grow 2 feet tall.

Planting

Mix compost, manure, or peat into soil. A slow-growing crop, okra does fine in any fertile, well-drained soil.

Sprinkle commercial fertilizer into the planting area a day or two before planting. In regions with short growing seasons, start seeds indoors eight weeks before the frost-free date. Use individual peat pots to avoid disturbing plants at time of transplanting. Plant in the garden after all danger of frost passes and the ground is thoroughly warm.

Care

If you sow seeds in the garden, thin plants to 6 inches apart. Mulch with grass clippings or shredded leaves. Keep after weeds, never allowing them to interfere with seedling growth. Water whenever soil dries out. Fertilize every two weeks. If your area is prone to windstorms, stake the plants. Some growers pinch off the growing tips when they pick the first pods to encourage lateral branching. Carbaryl will kill any insects, including corn earworms, that might attack the plants.

Harvest

Pick pods when they are immature (small and soft). The size varies with the variety. Some growers let the pods mature, then eat the seeds inside, but this is rare. If pods mature on the plants, the plants will die. Pick all

pods if frost is possible. Some people are allergic to okra and must wear gloves when working with it. Okra has a natural gumminess when cooked.