

# How to Grow Sweetcorn

## Introduction:

Sweetcorn is one of the most delicious vegetables for the home grower. Freshly picked, steamed and eaten with a knob of butter, sweetcorn is absolutely delicious.

Native to the Americas, sweetcorn has been cultivated for thousands of years. It is famous as one of the "Three Sisters" - corn, beans and squash. A member of the grass family (Poaceae), corn relies on the wind for pollination, this being the reason corn is planted in blocks rather than in long, single rows. It also makes it a useful windbreak and an ornamental feature.

It used to be the case that sweetcorn was difficult to grow away from the south of the country as a long, warm growing season is necessary, but new varieties have changed that. It does still need a long, warm growing season, but crop failures are mainly due to overcrowding and under-feeding. It is not suitable for container growing.

You can buy early, mid-season and late cultivars. In colder areas early varieties will do best. Super-sweet cultivars are much sweeter than older varieties and do retain their "sweetness" for longer, but they tend to be less vigorous.

Make sure you do not grow super-sweet plants next to other cultivars as cross pollination can result in poor flavour. Another option is Extra Tendersweet which is just as sweet but is less chewy.

## Planting Indoors

Sweetcorn needs warm conditions so sow seeds indoors at 18-21C (65-70F), from mid-April to early-May. Sow the large seeds in modules or deep pots at a depth of 2.5cm (1inch). To extend the growing season try sowing early, mid-season and late cultivars at the same time OR sow 1 early cultivar twice more, 3 weeks apart.

\*\*A suggestion from the author of "How to Grow Sweetcorn" on the site [www.allotment-garden.org/sweetcorn-growing](http://www.allotment-garden.org/sweetcorn-growing) is that to get good germination from what is expensive seed that you "chit" the seed (sprout the seed first).. He suggests you lay a sheet of damp kitchen paper in the base of a shallow lidded container. Place the seeds on the paper and cover with another sheet of damp paper. Put the lid on the container and place in a warm dark place at 20C (78F) - the airing cupboard is ideal - and

leave for for at least 3 days before checking to see that the seed has germinated. Then check on a daily basis as usually the seeds germinate within days of each other. As soon as the seeds have started to sprout then plant them into 8cm (3inch) pots 2.5cm (1inch) deep. Then plant out in in late spring as below.

## **Planting Outdoors**

Prepare the ground in winter by digging in lots of garden compost or well rotted manure. About 2 weeks before sowing or planting rake in Growmore or Vitax Q4 fertiliser at a rate of 3 handfuls per square metre/yard.

Plant seeds outdoors in late spring - under cloches in mid-May. To warm the soil put cloches in position 2 weeks before sowing. The soil temperature must be above 10C (50F).

Plant in blocks 45cm (18ins) apart. Sow 2 or 3 seeds at each point, thin out and leave only the strongest seedling to grow on. Leave cloches in place until foliage touches the top. Protect the seedlings with black cotton if birds are a pest. Keep the weeds down by either mulching the soil (this will also help retain moisture) or by careful hoeing as plants are shallow rooted. Stake plants individually if necessary. The "Tillers" or side shoots which may develop should not be removed. Water well in dry weather especially when plants are flowering. Liquid feed when cobs begin to swell.

To aid pollination tap the tops of plants when the male flower - tassels - open to help pollinate the female flower below. Poor pollination results in sparsely filled cobs.

## **Harvesting the cobs**

The corn has both male and female parts. The male part is known as the "**tassel**" and emerges from the top after all the leaves have emerged. Its flowers are long and hairy and usually consists of several branches along which many small male flowers are situated.

The "**silks**", the long, threadlike female flowers are situated lower down the plant and will eventually form the ears of corn. The job of these protruding silks is to catch the pollen drifting down from the tassels above thus aiding pollination and the growth of the corn.

Each plant will produce 1 or 2 cobs. Test for ripeness when the silks have turned chocolate brown. Pull back part of the sheath and squeeze a couple of grains between thumb and fingernail - if a watery liquid squirts out then the corn is unripe. If the liquid

is creamy then the cob is just right for picking. (If the liquid is too thick and doughy you have waited too long).

Carefully twist ripe cobs from the stem. Do this just before they are required for cooking.

## **Pests and Remedies**

**Pigeons and other birds** will pull away leaves and eat the kernel.

Remedy. Cover plants with fleece or netting or black cotton.

**Earwigs.** These pests eat irregular holes in the foliage of sweetcorn, they can also be found hiding inside the cobs and also eat the silks of the corn thus hindering growth,

Remedy. Try stuffing plant pots with hay or shredded paper and place in and around plant. Earwigs will then hide in the pots and you just need to shake them out well away from the vegetable garden.

**Mice.** Will eat the seeds.

Remedy. Break-back traps as used against house mice are effective where damage is occurring. However these must be placed under covers to reduce any damage to other animals and birds.

**Slugs and snails.** Will feed on the young seedlings.

Remedy. Beer traps, sawdust, egg shell barriers....

**Fruit Fly.** Maggots bore into the growing points of seedlings causing twisted and ragged leaves. Growth is stunted and undersized cobs are produced.

Remedy. Use seeds dressed with an insecticide.

**Smut.** Galls (large smut balls) appear on the cobs and stalks in hot, dry weather. Cut off and burn immediately they are seen or the galls will burst open and release a mass of black spores.

Remedy. There is no fungicide to control this problem. Burn all plants after harvesting and do not plant sweetcorn in the same area for at least 3 years.

## **Growing for our Annual Show.**

There is one class for sweetcorn in our show; Class 25 Two sweetcorn. Sweetcorn attracts 18 pts; condition 5pts, uniformity 4pts, size 3pts, shape 3pts and colour 3pts.

Fresh cylindrical cobs, well set throughout including the tips, with straight rows of undamaged grains, fresh green husks and silks attached. Grain that is in best condition for table use and of a uniform colour, which may be pale cream, white or of an intermediate colour. Leave no more than one inch of stalk attached and expose the contents by pulling down the husk and neatly tucking it under the cob.

**Refs:** [www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/sweetcorn/grow-your-own](http://www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/sweetcorn/grow-your-own)  
[www.allotment-garden.org/sweetcorn-growing](http://www.allotment-garden.org/sweetcorn-growing)

