

OKRA



- In Yuma County, okra is grown primarily as a seed crop. This year there are about 100 acres of okra being grown for seed in the area.
- The term, “Lady's Fingers” is another name for okra and, dates back to the early 20th century. The kidney vetch, with small thin flowers said to resemble a small hand originally held claim to the name 'lady's fingers' (17th century), but in the late 19th century the name was applied to okra as well.
- The name 'okra' probably derives from one of the Niger-Congo group of languages (the name for okra in the Twi language is *nkuruma*). The term okra was in use in English by the late 18th century.
- Okra is a member of the Mallow family, related to cotton, hibiscus and hollyhock. It is a tall (6 ft) annual tropical herb cultivated for its edible green seed pod (there is also a red pod variety, which turns green when cooked).
- Okra has heart shaped leaves (one species is cultivated for its edible leaves), and large, yellow, hibiscus-like flowers. The seed pods are 3 - 10 inches long, tapering, usually with ribs down its length. These tender, unripe seed pods are used as a vegetable, and have a unique texture and sweet flavor. The pods, when cut, exude a mucilaginous juice that is used to thicken stews, and have a flavor somewhat like a cross between asparagus and eggplant.
- Okra probably originated somewhere around Ethiopia, and was cultivated by the ancient Egyptians by the 12th century B.C. Its cultivation spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The seed pods were eaten cooked, and the seeds were toasted and ground, used as a coffee substitute (and still is).
- Okra came to the Caribbean and the U.S. in the 1700s, probably brought by slaves from West Africa, and was introduced to Western Europe soon after. In Louisiana, the Créoles learned from slaves the use of okra to thicken soups and it is now an essential in Créole Gumbo.
- Today okra is popular in Africa, the Middle East, Greece, Turkey, India, the Caribbean, South America and the Southern U.S. It is not a very common vegetable in most European countries, except for Greece and parts of Turkey.
- Due to increased interest in American regional foods, these bright green, tender pods have gained more respect as a vegetable in the U.S., aside from its use as a thickener.
- Okra is a tropical plant which grows best in warm climates. It is available year-round, with a peak season during the summer months. The pods grow rapidly, being ready for harvest in about 60 days of summer weather, when grown from seed. They must be picked about 4 to 5 days after flowering, when 4 inches or so in length, before they mature and toughen. Okra comes in varying shades of green (there is also a new red variety), and can be smooth or have a ribbed surface.
- Purchase young, tender but firm pods. They should snap easily in half. The best varieties are a rich green color. Avoid pods that are dull and dry looking, blemished or limp.

- Okra pods are immature fruits and are harvested when they are very rapidly growing. Harvest typically occurs 3 to 7 days after flowering. Okra should be harvested when the fruit is bright green, the pod is fleshy and seeds are small. After that period, the pod becomes pithy and tough, and the green color and mucilage content decrease.
- Store in a paper bag in the warmest part of refrigerator, as temperatures below 45 degrees can damage okra. It does not store well, so use within 2 or 3 days at most.
- Do not wash until ready to use, or okra will become slimy. When preparing, remember that the more it is cut, the slimier it will become. Aluminum pots will discolor it.
- Mature okra pods can be used to make rope and even paper!
- Okra is excellent sautéed or fried. Very young, tender pods can be sliced, dipped in egg, breaded with corn meal and fried (a favorite in the Southern U.S.). Sauté with corn kernels, onion and sweet peppers. Okra can also be steamed, baked, pickled, boiled or stewed. Because of its similar flavor, it can be used in place of eggplant in many recipes. Use it raw in salads. Avoid long cooking times unless you are making soups, stews or gumbo.
- When the pods are cut, they exude a mucilaginous (thick and sticky) juice that is an excellent thickener for stews and soups, especially Créole Gumbo. The flavor blends well with acid foods such as tomatoes.
- Remember, okra is slimy and sticky - it is supposed to be that way. If you object to this quality, don't eat okra. You can't get rid of this quality by soaking or overcooking.
- Okra is a good source of vitamin C and A, also B complex vitamins, iron and calcium. It is low in calories, a good source of dietary fiber, and is fat-free.
- In some countries okra is popular is known as a pain reliever and a perfume called, ambrette, is made from the musky-odored okra seeds.

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