

September 5, 2018 with photo



*Photo by Jose Luis Aguiar, Farm Advisor,
UCCE Indio Office. Entered to UCANR as part of a photo contest.*

Okra

By Carolyn Shaw

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Okra is a tall-growing, warm-season, annual vegetable from the same family as hollyhock, rose of Sharon, and hibiscus. Native to Africa, it was brought to the Americas by slaves. This vegetable thrives in sweltering heat and withstands withering droughts. Its candelabra-like stems produce attractive crepe paper blossoms that resemble those of hibiscus or cotton. These blooms give rise to the edible seed pods. The pods are used in soups or stews, as pickles, or prepared sautéed, fried, or boiled.

When harvesting okra, the pods should be picked while they are tender and immature. They must be picked often, as the pods go quickly from tender to tough with increased size. Okra plants have short hairs that may irritate bare skin. Wear gloves and long sleeves to harvest okra. Use pruning shears for clean cuts that do not harm the rest of the plant. When the stem is difficult to cut, the pod is probably too old to use. The large pods rapidly become tough and woody. The plants grow and bear until frost. Four or five plants produce enough okra for most families.

The following pests can threaten your okra harvest: flea beetles, aphids, stink bugs, and earworms. Visit UC's integrated pest management site (ipm.ucanr.edu) for information on how to treat these pests.

Refrigerate unwashed, dried okra pods in the vegetable crisper, loosely wrapped in perforated plastic bags. Wet pods will quickly mold and become slimy. Okra will keep for only two or three days. When the ridges and tips of the pod start to turn dark, use it or lose it. Once it starts to darken, okra will quickly deteriorate. Freezing is the best method for long term home storage of okra. Freeze only young, tender okra. Okra must be blanched before freezing, as with all vegetables. Unblanched okra will quickly become tough and suffer huge nutrient, flavor, and color loss during freezing.

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Okra is a powerhouse of valuable nutrients, of which almost half is soluble fiber in the form of gums and pectins. Soluble fiber may lower serum cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease. The other half is insoluble fiber which may help to keep the intestinal tract healthy. Nearly 10% of the recommended levels of vitamin B6 and folic acid are also present in a half cup of cooked okra.

Okra exudes a unique mucilaginous (viscous or gelatinous) juice which is responsible for its thickening power in the famous Louisiana Creole gumbo dish (gumbo is Swahili for okra). Aside from gumbo, okra compliments tomatoes, onions and corn, shellfish and fish stock. Okra has a subtle taste, similar to the flavor of eggplant.

I've been using this recipe for okra and tomatoes for a while and my family loves it:

Okra and Tomatoes

- 2-4 garlic cloves, crushed or minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 cups okra, sliced in half, lengthwise
- 1 small onion cut into wedges
- 2 cups cherry tomatoes
- Balsamic vinegar
- Fresh herbs optional

Sauté garlic in olive oil till golden. Add okra and onion, cook until okra is tender and bright which should take 10 minutes or so. Add cherry tomatoes and cook just till they wilt. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Finish with a splash of balsamic vinegar and chopped fresh herbs. Delicious!!

For more information on Okra, visit: <http://extension.illinois.edu/veggies/okra.cfm>
For general vegetable garden information, visit: CAGardenWeb.ucanr.edu

The next Public Education class will be Saturday, September 8 at the Vegetable Garden located at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden. "2nd Saturdays with Barry" continues with a focus on garlic, shallots, and cover crops. Class runs 9:00 to 11:00 a.m.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind the Folsom Lake College-El Dorado Center. We're open 9:00 a.m. to noon, Fridays and Saturdays.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.