

# Corn

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## Introduction

Sweet corn is a member of the Gramineae (the grass family) *Zea mays var rugosa* is an annual grass which can grow up to 4 meters in height. Male flowers are contained in the tassel and female flowers in rows on a thick cob. Sweet corn is distinguished from other corns by its high sugar content when in the milk and early dough stages and by its wrinkled translucent kernels when dry. It differs genetically by a single recessive gene. Corn is thought to have originated in Mexico and been domesticated over 5000 years ago. Present day varieties of sweet corn had their introduction around the 1850's in the United States.

Sweet corn requires a minimum soil temperature of 10°C for germination and root development. (Soil temperature optimum range 21°-27°C). Corn responds well to warm conditions (optimum air temperature 21°- 30°C). Corn growth increases with temperature up to 30°C after which growth response decreases. Corn heat units can be used to assess the normal rate of growth for sweet corn (10°C base temperature). Variety selection based upon corn heat unit requirements to reach expected maturity can be matched to normal corn heat unit values expected at a location. Sweet corn production can be accelerated by planting the seed in plastic covered trenches. This crop is very sensitive to frost but if the growing point is not frozen then the crop may regrow normally. Corn requires a good, even supply of moisture. Irrigation particularly at the time of pollination and early kernel formation may improve quality and yields of this crop. Frost control may be achieved through solid set irrigation systems for corn maturing in late September and early October. Sweet corn produced in more northerly climates is sweeter than that produced in the south.

A well-drained soil with good water retention is desirable. Sandy loams, loams and silt loams, high in organic matter, are best suited to this crop. Corn is a shallow rooted crop. Flooding is injurious to plants yet water stress is also detrimental to plant development.

Harvest of early sweet corn cultivars occurs in late July and late corn crops are usually harvested by early October. The peak of the sweet corn season is usually the last week in August when demand and supply are at the highest. Yields of 2000 to 3000 dozen hectare are typical (6000 to 10,000 kg per hectare).

Early cultivars are lower yielding than late cultivars. Presently most sweet corn is marketed through roadside stands, farmers markets and delivery directly to retail chain stores. Only a small volume is marketed through wholesale channels. With proper post-harvest cooling and more mechanization, development of the whole sale market is possible. There may be some specialty markets for high quality corn such as in the H.R.I. trade.

**Nutrient Content:** Provides carbohydrates, potassium and folate; fair amount Vitamin A as well as other nutrients to the diet. 1 ear contains 70 kilocalories, 250 mL (1 cup) kernels contains 148 kilocalories.

## Crop Establishment

Early Sweet Corn cultivars need 1900 CHU's mid-season cultivars need 2000 to 2100 CHU's and late season cultivars 2200 - 2300 CHU's. Late cultivars can usually be grown successfully in the most favorable climate areas of the Atlantic Region.

**Seed Treatment** - Do not plant cultivars early which are known not to have seed cold hardiness as seed decay may result in poor stands.

- (1) Plant when soil temperature is above 18°C.
- (2) Use seeding rates 20% higher than normal.
- (3) Plant shallow.
- (4) Plant into moist ground.
- (5) Handle seed carefully as kernels can crack easily.
- (6) The use of plastics usually improves germination.

Treatment of seed with a bird repellent should be considered against the removal of the seed and/or plant by birds. Augmented-Sugar Cultivars - Se and SH2 are two different genes used by sweet corn breeders to increase the sugar level of some of the new cultivars.

These genes also make the corn retain its sweetness longer. You may hear the term "super sweet"; this refers to cultivars with the SH2 gene. All these new cultivars express their high sugar levels best when grown in isolation, away from both field corn and regular sweet corn. Isolation is most critical with cultivars containing the SH2 gene: e.g. Crisp and Sweet. Isolation can be obtained by growing these cultivars 75 meters away from other corn. These cultivars can also be considered isolated if the corn grown within 75 meters has a 2-week difference in tasseling time.

In scheduling a supply of corn for an extended market period, it is usually preferable to plant a number of cultivars which mature at different times, rather than attempting to plant one or two cultivars at different times.

Seeding/Planting - Depth of seeding should be no greater than is required to maintain a cover until emergence usually 1 - 2.5 cm, depending on the soil type. Row spacing are usually determined by equipment, closer row spacing usually results in increased yields, provided moisture and fertility are not limited. Too close a spacing between plants reduces ear size and may result in no marketable ears in crowded stands. For early cultivars, rows should be about 75 cm apart, and plants 15 to 20 cm. For tall, late cultivars, rows about 90 cm apart, and plants 20 to 30 cm. Depending on the seed size this usually requires 11 to 17 kg of seed per hectare to produce 50,000 to 85,000 plants per hectare.

## Crop Management

Clear plastic mulch can be used to advance the maturity of the corn by 10 to 14 days. Germination and yields are usually increased. Prepare the seed bed, apply fertilizer, work broadcast fertilizer deep enough to allow for trench depth, make trenches, sow seed in the bottom of the trench, band some fertilizer at seeding if desired, apply a herbicide and then cover with the plastic mulch. Two rows spaced about 40 cm apart are usually covered with a strip of plastic 1.2 m wide, pairs of rows are then spaced 1.5 to 2 m apart depending on the equipment. Seed is planted in furrows 10 cm deep and about 15 cm wide at the top. This allows space for plants to grow until the plastic is removed. Some holes about 1 cm in diameter should be made in the plastic to allow rain to penetrate and

provide some ventilation. This is usually done by drilling into the roll to coincide with the seeded rows. The plastic is removed soon after the plants come in contact with the mulch.

Do not use high levels of residual herbicides on this crop if field rotation is planned the following year. Cut corn stubble with a rotary mower while the corn stalks are still green and plow this green material into the soil. Establish a cover or green manure crop if possible to stop erosion and/or provide more green manure.

## Nutrition

ALL ADDITIONS OF LIME AND FERTILIZER OR MANURES SHOULD BE BASED ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A SOIL TEST.

Sweet corn requires high fertilization. Manure is a valuable material and 20 to 40 tonnes of manure per hectare may advantageously be substituted for part of the fertilizer.

**Lime** - Lime should be applied to maintain the soil pH in the range 6.0 to 6.8 for best results. Corn will tolerate a pH as low as 5.5 where the soil contains good levels of calcium and magnesium.

**Nitrogen** - is the element usually most limiting crop quality and yields. Manures and moderate levels of nitrogen should be applied pre-plant. The maximum level of N plus K banded is 80 kg per hectare (actual). Nitrogen may be side dressed but should be done early (before plant is 30 cm high). The corn plant's potential is determined at an early age.

**Phosphorus** - At least 50 kg per hectare of phosphorus should be banded. This will encourage earliness of production and increase the yield potential.

**Potash** - Response of corn to potash is that with adequate feedings ears are better filled to the tips and stalk strength is increased.

**Magnesium** - is a common deficiency and can be corrected by applying sprays of epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) at 5.5 kg per hectare. This should not be necessary on fields properly limed with dolomitic limestone.

**Sulfur** - where high rates of manures are not used on sandy soils with low organic matters one should consider the use of gypsum to supply an adequate soil level of sulfur.

**Micronutrients** - Zinc deficiency occurs in this region especially with cold wet springs and in fields low soil organic matter, poor soil structure, and high levels of phosphorus. Where zinc is required it may be applied to the soil mixed in the fertilizer at rates supplying 4 to 12 kg zinc per hectare. The higher rate should be sufficient for up to 3 years. Not more than 4 kg of zinc per hectare should be banded at seeding. Zinc may be applied as a spray at rates supplying 0.6 kg of zinc per 1000 L of water. A wetting agent should be added.

**Boron** - Deficiency may be a problem on coarse sandy fields with a high pH and low organic matters where boron has not been applied on rotational crops. Care must be taken that the crop is not injured by a soil or foliar application of boron. (Use .1B in the fertilizer)

**Application Method** - A portion of the nitrogen and phosphorus required should be applied at seeding in one of two ways:

(1) In a band 5 cm to the side and 5 cm below the seed. The rate of application in a band should not supply more than 75 kg nitrogen per hectare or a total of 120 kg of nitrogen plus potash per hectare in 75 cm rows. If urea is the nitrogen source, not more than 40 kg nitrogen or 80 kg of nitrogen plus potash per hectare should be applied, in 75 cm rows.

(2) In a band directly with the seed. With this placement not more than 9 kg nitrogen plus potash (K<sub>2</sub>O) per hectare should be applied, in 75 cm rows. A major portion of the nitrogen should be

applied pre-plant or side dressed before the corn is 30 cm high. A major part of the phosphate and potash may be broadcast and worked in before seeding in the spring.

## Pests and Pest Control

### Weeds

Excellent weed control is possible in corn through the proper selection and use of herbicides. When plastic mulches are used, pre-plant incorporated herbicides are usually not deep enough to control weeds germinating from the bottom of the trench, therefore a pre-emergence herbicide must be used. The herbicide Bladex has injured sweet corn grown under plastic mulch when excessive rainfall has caused flooding of the trenches.

An over reliance on atrazine alone will encourage the buildup of resistant weeds, especially annual grasses. To avoid this, growers should use an annual grass herbicide in conjunction with atrazine and practice crop rotation. The application of high rates of atrazine or simazine will result in residues in the soil that will cause injury on most rotational crops.

## Diseases

### Leaf Diseases

#### Rust and Eyespot (fungi)

**Characteristics:** Rust begins as small raised pustules scattered over both surfaces of the leaves. The pustules rupture, exposing dusty, red spores and later black spores. The red spores are spread by wind and can infect leaves directly. The eyespot fungus causes small, elongated lesions with distinct yellow halos. This fungus overwinters in corn debris.

**Control:** Damage is often light. Practice clean plowing to encourage rapid rotting of corn debris and rotate with other crops to help prevent disease build-up. Maintain high soil fertility and adequate weed control.

#### Common Smut (fungus)

**Characteristics:** Common Smut causes glistening silver-white galls on ears, stalks, leaves or tassels. The interior of the galls runs into masses of powdery dark brown material (spores).

**Control:** Infected plants should be removed and burned as soon as they are detected.

## Insects

### Seed corn Maggot

**Characteristics:** Small yellowish-white maggots .6 cm long with a pointed head end. The adult is a small grayish-brown fly. Maggots feed on seed, causing seed to produce a poor plant. They will also

feed on roots; causing poor plant growth. Seed corn maggots frequently attack deeply planted seeds.

**Control:** To prevent damage, sow seeds shallow in warm soil or apply a granular insecticide in furrow planting to protect seed or use treated seed.

## Wireworm

**Characteristics:** Early in the spring, adult wireworms (click beetles) lay their eggs around grass roots. The larvae hatch in about one week and will live for 2-6 years in the ground feeding on roots and seeds. The wireworms, or larvae, are yellow, white or darker shades of brown. They may be 1.2 to 4 cm long and have a hard, smooth surface. When a larvae is mature, it pupates in the fall. It then becomes an adult beetle and waits until spring to emerge. Wireworms are often numerous in land that has been in sod for several years. See Appendix III in the supplement to this guide. Wireworms are sometimes confused with millipedes which have numerous pairs of legs and coil up when disturbed.

**Control:** Avoid planting crops highly susceptible to wireworms in a field that has been recently in sod. Plant treated seed.

## European Corn Borer

**Characteristics:** The European corn borer is a flesh colored caterpillar, 2.5 cm long with brown spots and a dark brown head. The eggs are laid in clusters on corn plants. After they hatch, the larvae move to the tassel of the plant. The tassel frequently "breaks" (bends over sharply) because it has been tunneled. The larvae then move down the stalk and enter either the side of the cob or the stalk itself. Damage to the ear makes it unsaleable.

**Control:** The corn borer can be controlled culturally by removing old stalks from the field to prevent over- wintering and practicing crop rotations. Fall plowing is also beneficial.

## Corn Earworm

**Characteristics:** Corn earworms vary in color from light yellow to green or brown. They have a yellow head and grow to almost 5 cm in length. The adult moths are carried in on high winds from the south- eastern U.S. They lay their eggs on fresh silks coming from the ear. The larvae climb up the silk and feed on the developing kernels. The corn earworm can be confused with the fall armyworm.

**Control:** Control is best effected by applying an insecticide 2 days after the first silks appear. This must be repeated at 3 to 5 day intervals or as necessary until the silks dry off. Spray should be directed to wet the silks.

## Fall Armyworm

**Characteristics:** The larvae are generally tan colored, with stripes, smooth skin, indistinguishable from corn earworm. Early injury in whorls causes tattered leaves; later injury is confined to the tassels and ears with feeding on kernels at tip and base of ear. They also invade corn borer tunnels in stalks. The adults are migratory, overwinter in Central America and appear any time after late June. They are generally a greater problem following a cool, wet spring in the South Eastern U.S.

**Control:** The fall armyworm is controlled by spraying when damage appears on the foliage. Sprays applied for com earworm control will also prevent fall armyworm injury in ears.

## Potato Stem Borer

**Characteristics:** The potato stem borer, fully grown, is about 4.5 cm long and pinkish-white in color with a brown head. The larvae move from plant to plant increasing the damage. The eggs laid in August do not hatch until June of the following year. Damage can be expected in June and July.

**Control:** There is, at present, no insecticide that will give good practical control of this insect. Because the moth lays eggs chiefly on couch grass during late August and early September, control of this weed in particular and clean cultivation in general are important preventive measures. Avoid planting corn in narrow strips with grassy margins. Cultivate field boundaries, or spray with a chemical weed killer to reduce couch (quack) grass.

SPECIFIC CHEMICAL CONTROLS FOR THE VARIOUS CROP PESTS DISCUSSED MAY BE FOUND IN THE APPLICABLE PEST MANAGEMENT GUIDES ON THE PERENNIA WEBSITE

## Harvesting and Handling

Harvest at the thick milk stage. Whenever possible, harvest in the morning when the ears are cool. Market on the day of harvest especially if proper cooling is not practical. Sugar content decreases rapidly after harvest, but less so if the corn is cooled. Rapid lowering of the temperature in the ears (pre-cooling), such as by submersion in ice-water or hydrocooling, is highly desirable.

## Storage and Conditioning

Sweet corn quality can be maintained fairly well for 4 to 8 days after harvest at a temperature of -0.5 to 0°C, and a relative humidity of 90 to 95%, after pre-cooling, but should be marketed as soon as possible. Because green corn produces much heat of respiration, it should not be handled or stored in bulk for long periods.

## Bibliography

**This document was originally part of the Vegetable Production in Atlantic Canada Guide Produced by the APASCC Advisory Committee on Vegetable Production, it was reformatted and updated by Perennia in 2017.**

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