

**Still Time to Plant Okra**  
**Greg Grant, Tyler Morning Telegraph**  
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Hopefully, you grow a garden or know someone that does. Hot weather is on its way, but there's still time to plant Southern peas, sweet potatoes, and okra.

Okra is synonymous with Southern culture. The African name for okra was *gumbo* and subsequently gave us the name for the popular Creole soup that my Cajun wife can make blindfolded. I grew up with okra and like it raw, boiled, roasted, grilled, fried, stewed, and certainly in gumbo which my wife makes both with ("Aunt Eva's Okra Gumbo") and without ("Ville Platte Gumbo"). Lots of folks that don't like okra will eat it sprinkled with olive oil, seasoned salt, sea salt, or Tony Chachere's, and roasted in the oven at 400 degrees. Fried was my favorite growing up, because my mom could fry a shoe and make it edible.

Okra is a warm season plant that cannot tolerate frosts, freezes, or even cool nights. It thrives on heat so should be planted well after the last frost each year, generally April-May in East Texas, but as late as July 4. Okra is easily planted from seed. Soak it in warm water over night to speed up the germination process. Once the seedlings are established and about 6 inches tall, thin them to 12-18 inches apart. Occasionally okra transplants are available which can be planted at the same spacing.

Okra needs at least 8 hours of direct sun each day for maximum production. It isn't picky about soils if they drain well. Due to a susceptibility to root knot nematodes, it is best to avoid areas where this has been a problem in the past or where okra was planted the previous year. It is ideal to till in several inches of compost or organic matter and incorporate 2 pounds of a complete lawn fertilizer (15-5-10, etc.) per 100 square foot of bed or every 35 feet of row before planting. For small plantings use 2 teaspoons per square foot or foot of row. The ideal soil pH for growing okra is 6.0-7.0

Okra can be planted on flat ground, in raised beds, or rows. The rows should be 6-8 inches high, 24 inches wide, and 36-48 inches apart. Using the corner of a hoe or a stick, open a trench ½-¾ inch deep and plant the okra seed at a rate of 4-5 per foot of row. Cover the seed lightly with well cultivated soil and gently tamp down with the back of the hoe to conserve moisture and ensure good seed to soil contact.

Okra is easy to grow and relatively pest-free, however there are a few potential problems including nematodes and fire ants. First ants can inflict damage to the blooms, young pods, and your hands. Treat the base of the plants and the mounds with an appropriately labeled pesticide when they occur. After thinning, lightly sidedress them with a high nitrogen fertilizer, such as 21-0-0. I also use chicken litter from my flock.

Okra pods should be harvested when they are 3-5 inches long and tender. Sometimes they will snap from the plant, but I usually use a pair of hand pruners. Okra foliage irritates some gardener's skin, including mine, so you might want to wear a long sleeve shirt. Okra needs to be harvested every other day to keep producing well. If the pods are left on the plant until they get tough and the seeds plump up, the entire plant will stop producing.

All okra varieties do well in East Texas. When the plants get too tall to pick, I cut the top of the middle stalk which makes the plant branch from below at lower heights and increases production. Okra is native to Africa.

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**Image caption: *Okra is heat tolerant and easy to grow.***