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News Release

Ode to Okra

Question: Our okra seems to have ants all over it. Will they kill the plant? I also wondered if there is anything special about the red variety of okra, does it taste the same as the green variety?

Answer: Ants on okra seems to be a question we get every year. Years ago we would say, no they won't hurt the plant, they are mainly on the okra to get the honeydew produced by aphids, sharpshooters, and other sucking insects. But since the importation of the fire ant we have to ask if that's the type of ant on your okra, because imported fire ants will feed on the base of developing blooms causing them to abort and fall off. This in turn will cause the okra plant to stop producing. So to answer the first part of your question, you must first identify the type of ant. If it's not fire ants there is nothing to worry about, if it is fire ants locate and kill the mound or use bait outside the garden area. For information on imported fire ant control see our website www.aces.edu.

Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is a tall-growing, warm-season, annual vegetable, related to the same family as hibiscus, rose of Sharon and the hollyhock. Okra needs warm soil temperatures to germinate correctly and should be planted in the late spring at least 3 to 4 weeks after all danger of frost, and the nighttime temperatures average above 50⁰ F. Okra does best started from seed as it doesn't transplant well, plus purchasing seed is more economical than purchasing plants and you have a wider selection of varieties to choose from. You may want to plant an old favorite such as Clemson Spineless, or opt for one of the many different varieties available on the market today. Just a sample of what's out there is listed below.



Red Burgundy -- 4' tall plants with burgundy colored pods which cook up green.

Star of David – Heirloom from Israel, plants sometimes reaching 7', large pods which when sliced crosswise resemble the Star of David.

Alabama Red – Heirloom originating from Alabama, produces unusual flat, red pods.*

Cow Horn – Plants sometimes reaching 8' tall with heavy yields of long tender pods.

**Both red and green pod varieties have the same flavor and nutritional value.*

No matter which variety you choose the pods are best when cut at a tender, immature stage and will continually produce best when harvested often (usually every other day). Okra plants do have short hairs that may irritate the hands and arms of people with sensitive skin; if this is the case wear gloves and long-sleeves when harvesting or handling the plants. Harvesting often and early will prevent the pods from becoming tough and woody. Four or five plants will provide enough okra for fresh eating for an average family; you may plant more if you wish to freeze some for future use throughout the year, which I highly recommend.

Not only is okra attractive in the garden with its large hibiscus like blooms, and sometimes colorful foliage depending on the variety, but it is also a powerhouse of nutritional value.

Nutrition Facts: (1/2 cup sliced, cooked okra)

Calories – 25
Dietary Fiber – 2 grams
Protein – 1.52 grams
Carbohydrates – 5.76 grams
Vitamin A – 460 IU
Vitamin C – 13.04 mg
Folic acid - 36.5 micrograms
Calcium – 50.4 mg
Iron – 0.4 mg
Potassium – 256.6 mg
Magnesium – 46 mg

Okra produces a unique mucilaginous juice which provides the prized thickening power famous in Creole gumbo and is a featured ingredient in other Creole and southern style favorites. Some folks don't relish the slick nature of the cut, cooked pods. If that's the case you will be glad to know there are ways to enjoy this nutritious vegetable that eliminate or reduce this consistency. The smallest, tender pods are delicious raw when added whole or cut up to a tossed salad. When they are small they may also be cut up and cooked with other vegetables in a liquid that will reduce some of the slickness. Pickled okra is another way to enjoy this versatile vegetable. For more information on growing okra, recipes, and home preservation instructions please call the St. Clair county Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or visit our website at www.aces.edu/StClair.