

Edible Landscaping: Okra

Don Boekelbeide

Okra is more than a vegetable. It is a litmus test. If you are a true Southerner, you relish the way a spicy gumbo slips so smoothly down the hatch. And you'd never stomp around hollering about marijuana, like hapless Yankee cops have been known to do on encountering their first okra patch.

“Officer, it’s not what you think! And please don’t stomp on the watermelons!”

Not that okra really has any botanical relationship to pot. It’s a hibiscus, and until botanists had one of their periodic renaming frenzies (their revenge on gardeners and others who actually grow plants), it was known as *Hibiscus esculentus*. Nowadays okra is *Abelmoschus esculentus*, but it’s a hibiscus all the same, a kissing cousin to cotton, and to all those front yard hibiscuses Charlotteans traditionally call “roses,” such as rose of Sharon and Confederate rose.

(So, what’s the deal with pot? To the uninitiated, the leaves look generally similar. That’s about it. The worst offender is okra’s local relative and North Carolina 1997 wildflower of the year, swamp rose-mallow, *Hibiscus moscheutos*. Only grow it if you don’t mind explaining what it isn’t, over and over and over....)

Okra’s many names retrace its history. In English, we prefer okra, derived from West African languages around the Bay of Benin. Forced laborers kidnapped from West African to work in the European New World colonies brought the seeds and the name with them across the horrifying Middle Passage. The French use *gombo*, from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa. That term took root in New Orleans, giving us ‘file gumbo’ (and more recently, the name of Charlotte’s local Cajun band, “Carolina Gator Gumbo”). By Jefferson’s day, okra had spread throughout the South.

As a semi-tropical, preferring warm temperatures and shorter day lengths (it isn’t too picky about soil), okra just won’t thrive up North.

Okra also spread to the East, becoming a traditional part of Indian cooking. There, it goes by *bindi*, plus a host of other local names.

Okra seed choices at our local big boxes seem limited to Clemson Spineless, Clemson Spineless and Clemson Spineless. It’s a good variety. As Dr. Mary Peet of NCSU points out, back in 1939, the good folks at Clemson bred the irritating spiny hairs out of the plant, so it could be picked without wearing gloves. But Clemson Spineless certainly isn’t the only choice.

My favorite okra source, and a great resource for all Southern gardeners, is Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, www.southernexposure.com. They list no fewer than fifteen different types, from Alabama Red to Stewart’s Zeebest.

Okra comes in red as well as green, something not surprising coming from a hibiscus. Southern Exposure offers the AAS winner for 1988, Burgundy, to add color to the veggie garden, and make a nice addition to the stew too.

Southern Exposure also features Choppee, a favorite of Dr. David Bradshaw, founder of Clemson’s heritage seed program. Choppee is shorter than other varieties, producing an excellent crop of tender pods.

Bradshaw used Choppee as the poster child to illustrate an important lesson—Southern heirloom varieties often do better given more space, not crowded closely together. They were bred that way, he points out, to help them perform well with our poorer soils and disease-engendering high moisture and heat during the growing season. Instead of crowding plants, Bradshaw grew Choppee about three feet apart, so they grew like candelabras, sporting dozens of okra fruits on bushy stems. Some old-timers even pinch the central shoot to increase side branching.

Okra isn’t too picky about soil. A good garden soil with typical vegetable fertilization will do fine. Don’t

overdo the nitrogen. Just like with tomatoes, too much N can cause more vegetation but less fruit, and predispose okra to disease.

Okra is picky about temperature. If the soil isn't warm enough, it just won't grow. May and into June are the times to sow. Soaking seed overnight is a good idea (one I sometimes don't get around to, admittedly), and direct seeding works better for me than transplanting. Plant 3-4 seeds per foot then thin to the population you want, or plant in pockets of 3-4 seeds spaced 3 feet apart.

Okra keeps producing and producing right up to frost, on one condition—you've got to keep picking and picking. Two reasons for this:

If you keep picking, the plant will keep on making new pods. If not, it will channel energy into the seed. Okra seed is rich in oil and protein, so some researchers are interested in that unexplored aspect of the plant as a nutritional supplement in the developing world. Most of us home gardeners in Charlotte have the great good fortune to be able to focus on tender pods rather than on preventing Kwashiorkor, however.

About that tenderness . . . as okra gardeners soon discover, it goes away quickly if the pod isn't harvested right away. Left for even four or five days, pods can become hopelessly woody. Relentless, regular harvesting is an absolute must! And the best way to use the harvest is right away. At regular refrigerator temperatures, okra quickly becomes discolored and, at times, toughens up in the fridge. If you can't use it fresh, blanch it and pop it in the freezer.

So, what's the deal on the slime? During my Peace Corp tour in Togo, I became something of an expert, since slime is prized in Ewe cooking. It turns out there are good reasons for this. Okra slime's complex of polysaccharides, proteins and minerals has many health benefits, including purifying the body of toxins and cholesterol, stabilizing blood sugar, and—combined with okra's fiber—providing a very healthful and gentle intestinal tonic (Zook, from Ravi Kochhar at <http://www.physiology.wisc.edu/ravi/okra/#nutrition>, 2006; Woolfe, Chaplin and Otchere, 1976).

Admittedly, it takes some getting used to. More than one returned Peace Corps volunteer I served with still, decades later, has nightmares about meals of foo-foo and snot sauce. Oh, the hazards of global diplomacy.

(The Ewes cultivate a particularly slimy variety of okra, as well as use other slime sources in their cuisine, such as baobab leaves (remember the big tree in St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*?) Asian okras, such as Burmese, are markedly less mucilaginous. American varieties fall somewhere between.)

Two final points for Charlotte veggie gardeners:

Okra has a very lovely sister, roselle, *Hibiscus sabdajiffa*. It closely resembles okra, but with prettier flowers, and a reddish tint to foliage. It's grown for the red calyxes, used in teas, such as Red Zinger. It grows well here, but since its production is short day length sensitive, it will produce best when days are about 12 hours long, as occurs throughout the year in the tropics.

You may find seeds for "Chinese okra" that look completely different from other okra seed. Reading the seed packet, you'll find that it grows as a vine. What's going on? "Chinese okra" is really a squash, *Luffa acutangula*, a close relative of the luffa sponge, and not really okra at all. On the other hand, it isn't slimy, either. DB

Don Boekelheide is well known in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area and beyond. Currently, he serves the community as Garden Program Director for the Urban Ministry Center. A former Extension Master Gardener with Mecklenburg County, Don is a Master Composter for Mecklenburg County and instructor at Central Piedmont Community College, who grows beautiful, unusual and delicious foods in his front yard, a true edible landscape.