

## “Okra – A Southern Treasure,” by Phil Peek

### *Hibiscus esculentus*

**Common name:** Okra, also known as ‘gumbo’ (because it’s used in dishes by the same name).

**Family name:** Malvaceca, or the mallows.

Okra is a warm-season annual vegetable that grows well in Virginia and North Carolina. Some of its family members are cotton, hollyhock, and rose of Sharon. Okra can grow up to 3 to 6 feet high, or more. The pods are edible and are usually fried, used in gumbo, canned, or prepared in many ways.

Some of the more popular varieties of okra are: ‘Clemson Spineless’, ‘Emerald’, ‘Burgundy’, and ‘Annie Oakley II’.

Okra originated from Africa, probably in Ethiopia, where it was grown on the fertile plains between the Nile and the mountains near the border with the Sudan. There’s no real consensus as to how it was routed to different parts of the world. It was probably carried through Egypt, Arabia, and on to India. It also made its way across North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and into Europe. French colonist brought okra with them to Louisiana where it’s featured prominently in the local cuisine to this day.

Okra is easy to grow but needs warm soil temperatures near 65 degrees. In Virginia, the recommended timeframe to plant okra is between April 5 and June 16 [1]. Soil should be well-drained and have a pH near 5.8 to 6.5. If growing okra in a family garden for a season, plan on planting 3-5 plants per person to have a harvest large enough for everyone.

In Virginia the okra harvest can begin as early as August 15 and continue until the first frost (around November 15) [1]. Immature pods should be cut when they’re 2-3 inches long and tender. Pods that are difficult to cut probably shouldn’t be used. Okra plants will produce pods throughout the growing season. It may be necessary to cut pods every few days.

One of my favorite childhood memories growing up in Texas was going out to the family garden and picking okra with my mother. This was exciting because it meant a big heaping bowl of crunchy, southern goodness, at dinner on Sunday afternoon. Fried okra!



Cont.

## Recipe for Fried Okra from Allrecipes.com

### Ingredients:

- 10 pods okra, slice in ¼" pieces
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup cornmeal
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- Vegetable oil (amount depends)

### Directions

1. Soak okra in egg for 5-10 minutes in a small bowl.
2. Mix cornmeal, salt, and pepper in a medium bowl.
3. Dredge okra in the cornmeal mixture until evenly coated. Put in the refrigerator for 30 minutes. This helps the cornmeal mixture stick while frying.
4. Heat vegetable oil in a deep fryer, or pot, over medium heat to 350 degrees.
5. Carefully add the okra mixture into the oil.
6. Cook for 3-5 minutes until golden brown.
7. Remove and drain on paper towels.

Also recommend ranch dressing for dipping.

Enjoy!

Photos by Phil Peek

### References:

[1] Virginia's Home Garden Vegetable Planting Guide: Recommended Planting Dates and Amounts to Plant - Virginia Cooperative Extension

NC State ces.ncsu.edu – Okra: A Summer Tradition with a Past – Paige Burns

NC State ces.ncsu.edu – Okra: A Southern Tradition in Every Garden – William Kelly

University of Illinois Extension – web.extension.illinois.edu

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Allrecipes.com

