



Urban Harvest

## Backyard Corn can be Grown with Little Effort

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Sweet corn can be grown in small plots, but must be verdant green to produce good ears.

Corn is the only easy-to-harvest and use backyard grain. With a little effort and a raised bed space of 4 feet by 4 feet, you can produce 16 or more ears of outstanding food. Here's how:

There are many types of corn: sweet corn, dent, flint, popcorn, and flour corn as well as gourdseed and broom. Those dents and flints grown for human consumption are used for cornbread, tortillas and hominy grits. All of these kinds can be grown in southeast Texas, but varieties not adapted to the hot, humid south will get moldy before harvest.

Sweet corn comes in open pollinated (OP) and hybrid forms. The hybrids are divided into su, se, se&, and sh2 types.

Open-pollinated varieties such as Country Gentleman often are not as tender or as sweet as the hybrids, but have much better flavor. Some of us are replacing proven hybrids with locally grown open-pollinated seeds we can propagate. Try out an all-time favorite such as Stowell's Evergreen, or others: Golden Bantam, Texas Honey June, Ashworth or Luther Hill.

Sources of open-pollinated sweet corn include [Seed Savers Exchange](http://www.seedsavers.org) ([www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org)) and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange

([www.southernexposure.com](http://www.southernexposure.com)). Since corn is wind pollinated, and you must not cross-pollinate the variety with others. If you or your neighbors plant other corn varieties within 250 feet, and they tassel at the same time, you will likely not eat what you planted. For corn varieties with the same harvest times, planting every three weeks will be sufficient to ensure a good crop.

Among the hybrids, "Su" varieties are traditional hybrids like Silver Queen. They rapidly convert sugars to starch after harvest, but germinate well in cool soil. If you are marketing or refrigerating corn, Sus are not a good choice; if you are going to pick and eat, they can be excellent.

"Se" corn grows in cool soils, but ses have a sugar-enhancing gene from one parent (or sometimes from two - "se&") making them stay sweet longer after harvest. Bodacious, Argent and Kandy Korn are some of the best-loved ses.

"Sh2" supersweet types germinate poorly in cool soils, but you can sprout them indoors. They are sweetest of all, and keep their sweetness the longest. As a memory aid, think of su as Sugar Usual, se as Sugar Enhanced, and sh2 as Sugar double-sweet after harvest two weeks.

### **Varieties**

There are hundreds of varieties (and more names for the same kinds) and most hybrids will produce here. I have been disappointed with hybrids other than Silver Queen, the super-sweet Butterfruit from [www.parkseed.com](http://www.parkseed.com) and Florida Staysweet from [www.RHShumway.com](http://www.RHShumway.com).

For pollination, corn needs to be planted in blocks. In the spring, since the soil is too cool until May, set out sprouts sprouted indoors in damp paper towels. I get nearly 100 percent germination. Open-pollinated varieties need to be planted in blocks of six rows or more, so in a 5-foot bed I plant them 10 inches apart across the bed and 14 inches apart down the length of the bed. Hybrids generally do fine with four rows in each direction.

Corn grows quickly and creates a lot of high nitrogen-rich grain protein, so it needs adequate water and fertilizer to produce. From March to May, I work a balanced organic products ([www.sanjacorganic.com/AboutUs/buy.html](http://www.sanjacorganic.com/AboutUs/buy.html)) into the soil before planting at 1 cup per square foot. If your corn is weak or spindly, or not deep green, you haven't fertilized enough. Harvest when the silk on a corn ear turns deep brown, and the kernels are big and look ready to eat.

*This column is sponsored by Urban Harvest. To find out more about community gardens, school gardens, farmers markets and gardening classes, visit [www.urbanharvest.org](http://www.urbanharvest.org).*