

## Growing Sweet Corn Around Alice Springs

Horticulture Division, Alice Springs

### VARIETIES

Most sweet corn available to the home gardener are hybrids and all do reasonably well in our climate. Lochief is possibly the most readily available variety for home gardeners in the Alice Springs District.

### SOWING SEASON

Sweet corn can be planted from as soon as the danger of frost is over (usually sometime in September) through until early February. It requires 75 to 120 days from sowing to harvest.

Successive plantings are needed to ensure a continuous supply. Many home gardeners plant two crops, one in September and another in December or January.



### SOIL PREPARATION

Dig the soil as deeply as possible, adding available compost, animal manure or other organic matter. If the organic matter is not well decomposed the bed should be left for some time to allow for decomposition. Alternatively extra nitrogen (urea or sulphate of ammonia) can be given to the crop to compensate for the temporary nitrogen depletion caused by decomposing organic matter.

## **FERTILISER**

A mixture of 50 grams of Complete D<sup>®</sup> and 75 grams of superphosphate per metre of row can be placed 10 to 15 cm deep to one side of the planted row at planting. Side dressings of 10 grams of urea or 20 grams of sulphate of ammonia per metre of row can be applied after 25 and 50 days of growth to ensure good plant growth. Band the side dressing at about 25 cm out from the rows, or alternatively in rings around each plant. Avoid putting the fertiliser on the plant itself.

## **PLANTING**

Sweet corn should not be planted in single rows but in multiple rows, or clumps, to assist in wind pollination. Sow six seeds per metre of row with rows 50 cm apart. From this, three to four plants per metre of row will establish. Seed should be sown at 3-4 cm depth.

## **WATERING**

The seed-bed should be moist at sowing time and then watered at 3 day intervals initially. The watering frequency can be lengthened to once every 7 days for well developed plants. Plants should suffer no moisture stress during the growth period.

Approximately 4 mm per day or 12 mm every 3 days will be needed in September increasing to approximately 10 mm per day or 70 mm per 7 days in December, January and February. Water consumption drops rapidly once the cob has filled out.

Most types of irrigation are suitable for sweet corn, although drip irrigation will use less water if managed correctly. Sweet corn has a low salt tolerance. Water should preferably be below 500 mg/L T.D.S. but water of up to 1,000 mg/L TDS could be used where drainage is good and drip, furrow, or pond irrigation is used.

## **MANAGEMENT**

Apart from the management aspects mentioned above the area should be kept weed free and insect pests controlled. Mulching between plants is strongly recommended to conserve moisture, keep the soil cool, suppress weed growth and encourage earthworm and other desirable soil organism activity.

Block plantings are desirable to facilitate wind assisted pollination. Pollination can also be assisted by dusting the pollen onto the silks in the early morning. Insect damage to the silks can cause poor seed set regardless of good pollination.

## **INSECT CONTROL**

The most common pest of sweet corn is the heliothis caterpillar (corn earworm) which can damage silks, or the top grains on the cobs. It can be controlled by spraying at 7 days intervals with carbaryl starting just before tasselling.

**HARVESTING**

Cobs should be harvested when the silks start to dry, the husk becomes tight, and the kernels are full, yellow and exude a milky liquid if punctured. Cobs are hand harvested with a twisting downward motion that snaps the ear from the stalk. Most varieties mature in 75 to 100 days depending on variety and climate.

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