



Kevin Milaeger

**Okra has never become a familiar** vegetable here in the northern part of our country, but of course it is a staple in the American deep south. The pods of many types of okra are prickly on the outside, and all are slimy on the inside---that might be what has limited their popularity. But I grow okra mainly for its ornamental qualities. It is definitely a "hey look at me" kind of plant, especially the red varieties. I find every part of okra to be beautiful and fascinating---well, maybe not the slime---but everything else is bold and striking. Leaves, stems, veins, flowers, and seed pods are all appealing. You'll want to plant it where you can show it off.



Okra 'Jing Orange'



Okra 'Jing Orange'

Okra flowers are nothing if not spectacular. They are hibiscus-like, typically creamy white, pale yellow, or peachy, usually with a burgundy center. Size varies, but they can be several inches across. When the flower is finished, the bizarre fruit quickly starts to develop. You will have to make a decision shortly thereafter, whether to allow the strange pods to develop, or to eat them. If you choose to eat them, they should be cut from the stem when they are two or three inches long, before they get stringy and tough; also, the slimy quality is less pronounced if picked young. If you like, you can choose to leave them on the plant for

their ornamental value, and they will grow to six inches or more, depending on the variety. However, if you would like more fruit, they should be picked before they mature. The plant's goal is seed production. If you remove the seed filled pods before they mature, the plant will produce more flowers toward that end. If you keep picking, you will have more flowers and more pods until autumn. The pods are quite startling---garden visitors who aren't familiar with the plant will be asking you about them.

Okra loves sun and heat. The precise origin of the plant is under dispute, but equatorial West Africa seems likely---slaves were the first to bring the plant to the West Indies, and subsequently, continental North America. Like other tropical and sub-tropical plants, okra should not be planted outside until night temperatures stay above 55 degrees. Indeed, an old garden adage says to plant okra only after sweet corn is four inches tall---that would be about mid-June. Being in the mallow (hibiscus) family, okra likes a relatively moist soil, with little or no clay. I've never tried growing okra in containers, but I think they could be grown in large pots, as long as you water regularly. The shorter varieties of okra are quite sturdy, but I think staking the taller sorts might be a good idea. I have had to battle a few pests on okra---mainly aphids and Japanese beetles. Pesty enough, but they can easily be controlled if you are diligent. Okra is in the solanaceae family, so it is related to tobacco, eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers. It is susceptible to the diseases that affect those plants, so don't plant okra where you have grown those plants. Okra is best grown away from its relatives.



Okra 'Red Burgundy'



Okra 'Red Burgundy'

I've never made gumbo, but I know that okra is the integral ingredient---its mucilaginous quality is the thickening agent in gumbo. Of course, not all gumbo has okra in it, but okra has become so closely linked with gumbo, that in the regional patois, the terms are synonymous for many people.

At Milaeger's we are currently offering two varieties of okra, 'Jing Orange,' and 'Red Burgundy.' 'Jing Orange,' an Asian variety, can grow to six feet tall, but of course it can be pruned. Its fruit is colored orangey scarlet, and the stems are similarly colored. 'Red Burgundy' is

a fairly new hybrid. It has darker coloring and only grows to about four feet tall. Flowers are peach colored, and it is very productive. The plants are equally beautiful and I love growing them both, but I'll stick to using the plant as an ornamental showpiece---the gumbo probably has too many carbs for me!