

AFRICAN OKRA

Abelmoschus caillei

Malvaceae

ECHO® PLANT INFORMATION SHEET

Description

A semi-perennial, disease resistant, heat-loving okra. Grown in coastal nations of West Africa for centuries, it is most commonly grown in low elevations up to 1000 m. Grows well in hot, humid conditions with plenty of water. A ratoon crop may be grown since some plants grow many years, however long-lived plants can harbor disease. It has mid-sized, 8-12 cm long pods and continues to produce pods even when days are short. African okra produces many pods if harvested continuously. Leaves and flowers may also be consumed. Seeds are grey to green and more round in shape than common okra.

Origin

West and Central Africa. It is reported to be a hybrid of *Abelmoschus esculentus* and *A. manihot*.

Uses

Okra mucilage has been used medicinally to increase blood volume, and the leaves can be used in poultices. The bark contains a fiber which can be spun into rope, fishlines or game traps. The roasted seeds are said to be the best of the coffee bean substitutes.

Common Names

- French
 - gombo ouest-africain
 - gombo
- Spanish
 - Quimbombo Africano
 - Quimbombó De Temporada Seca
 - Quimbombó Del Oeste Africano
- Haitian Creole
 - Gombo Afriken
 - Kalalou
 - Okra sezon sech
 - okra Afrik-Lwes

Cultivation

- Elevation: Prefers low-lying humid areas.
- Rainfall: Full-grown plants can use 8 mm of water per day.
- Soil Types: Grows well in many soil types, but prefers well drained sandy loams with a pH between 6-7 and high content of organic matter.
- Temperature Range: Does not tolerate cooler temperatures.
- Day Length Sensitivity: Requires less than 13 hours of sunlight/day.
- Light: Full sun African okra grows in the humid tropics between 12°N and 12°S. It is not suited to semi-arid areas outside of this range.

The plants can reach a height of 4 m (13 ft) and survive up to 3 years. Plants should be spaced at least 60 cm (2 ft) apart. The seeds can be soaked for 24 hours prior to planting, and germination should occur within one week. Many cultivars, when planted at the beginning of the rainy season, will be mature enough to easily survive the dry season without additional irrigation.

Harvesting and Seed Production

African Okra pods can be harvested as early as 50-65 days from seeding. The young, harvestable pods should snap when bent. Early harvesting will decrease overall production, as will underharvesting. For seed production, pods should be left to mature on the plant until dry. Seeds may be stored up to 5 years.

Pests and Diseases

African Okra is generally resistant to pests and disease, but large scale production can encourage crickets, flea beetles, cotton bollworm and powdery mildew. Crop rotation, destroying diseased plants, and spraying with pyrethroids can decrease pest pressure.

Cooking and Nutrition

Pods, leaves and growing tips may be fried, boiled or added to soups (gumbo). The pods are a good source of vitamin C and calcium. Sliced pods may be dried for several days, stored and ground into powder for soups or sauces on fish or meat. Leaves of the African okra have more protein and less mucilage than the pods.

References

1. Siemonsma, West African Okra - Morphological and Cytogenetical Indications for the Existence of a Natural Amphiploid of *Abelmoschus esculentus* (L.) Moench and *A. manihot* (L.) Medikus, *Euphytica* 31: 242-252 (1982)