

Okra. Why isn't it more popular?

I am so impressed with Okra.

Summer is excruciatingly hot in Austin, Texas. Growing a garden is something that doesn't happen during July and August, and sometimes well into September. No amount of water can stave off the dried carnage that ensues. For me, summer means eating that quintessential tomato sandwich and freshly picked green beans for dinner as often as you can. In Central Texas, you will have to adjust. Tomato plants must go in the ground right after the last possible freeze. We're talking February or March. Not when you are thinking about a summer garden. This means wagering a gamble with the ficklest of powers - weather. I have had wins and I have had losses. And those tomato sandwiches will be enjoyed in the spring.

This year as I was picking out plants for my garden, I grabbed some okra on a whim. I have grown it before and remember how amazingly it produced, but this year I decided it deserved some special attention. I purchased a scarlet variety, which has a long pink pod. After weeks of triple digit temperatures, in the end of August, my three little plants that are now 7 feet tall are still cranking okra out. I have so much that I gave handfuls away to the neighbors. Three okra plants. Why aren't more people growing okra? I guess that could be a question along with why aren't more people growing vegetables in general? Fast-forward to the walkway garden I am planning in my head with mixed greens as the landscaping. My husband doesn't know this plan yet.



But back to okra. What an amazing plant. I come from a background of architecture, and we think on terms of vernacular when we think of being stewards of the environment. I know that organic farms typically grow vegetables that work, but I am still surprised that it isn't more recognized here as a practical crop and that we don't see more okra in the local cuisine. It seems to be limited to Creole and Cajun food. In fact, out of the two neighbors I gave the okra to, one was from Louisiana. He was thrilled to get fresh okra and ran inside and made a pot of gumbo that day. The other had never had it and wanted a couple to try first.

I dug around a bit and discovered that okra is a plant that is revered by most Central Texas gardening experts. Its origins are around Africa, which has similar extreme weather. It likes both full and part sun. It can handle most soils. Watering once a week will do. The space okra takes up is predominantly vertical and it pairs well with other plants in the garden. Its growing season is when other plants are struggling.

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Okra has countless uses too:

- eating, both pods and leaves
- cooking oil can be extracted from seeds
- can be dried and reconstituted later
- medicinal - diabetes, etc.
- a coffee like drink comes from roasted seeds
- stalks can be used as fiber for products such as paper.
- The liquid "mucilage" can be used for lubrication.

So, why isn't okra duly celebrated? Maybe people aren't familiar with okra? Why hasn't it been explored for crops, for any of its uses? I would think that the oil might be a bit laborious but using it for fiber gets me excited. Being so easy to grow, it seems it would have a positive contribution to our ever-growing problem of soil depletion. I never hear it being talked about for homeopathic remedies, but diabetes is rampant. It seems that a caffeine free coffee substitute would be a winner. And there are only a few ways that okra presents itself at the table. Most common are fried or in soups. What probably comes to mind for most people when confronted with okra is slimy stew. "Slimy" rarely gets my appetite going. But there really is so much more. An identity overhaul is overdue.

I believe I'll put a word in to my friends in the hemp business - maybe they don't know what this plant offers as a fiber crop? As for eating it, I have conducted some experiments. Of course, I love fried okra and I can eat gumbo any day of the week. But it is also fabulous on the grill. It couldn't be easier - olive oil and salt, thrown whole right on the grate. Take a little mayonnaise and chili salt, and you get something like Mexican street corn. It does well roasting in the oven, plain sliced or with a light cornmeal coating. Outside of Louisiana, pickled okra is not so prevalent, but you can make a quick refrigerator pickle with it and skip the all-day canning process. You can play with the brine; it can be sweeter, or it can be fiery. I made something like a picadillo for tacos and I have found it in recipes for Indian curry. I think it could make a great dried and crunchy snack. I found a recipe for the coffee, which I will try. I really think okra could take on so much more than it does. With so many possibilities and uses, it seems like this plant could save the world.

I do have to mention here that while I am happy to have this amazing plant in our lives, its journey to the Americas has a dark side. During a heart-breaking part of our history, okra shared a role in the African slave trade. With its high nutrition content, it was also thought to help condition these people displaced in a new country. We should honor and respect the tie okra has with its heritage, and revere in its new hope for possibility.