

# Sweetcorn

## SWEETCORN

Sweetcorn is not the easiest crop to grow in the UK, but newer varieties are now available that are better suited to our climate.

**SOWING:** Sow at 18-21°C from late March to early May indoors in peat pots or deep pots at a depth of 2.5cm. In mild areas you can sow seed directly outside from mid-late May in soil pre-warmed for two weeks by covering it with cloches or clear plastic. Choose a sunny position sheltered from strong winds. As the plants are wind pollinated, grow them in a block rather than rows. Sow two seeds 2.5cm deep, 45cm apart in rows 45cm apart. Leave the cloches or plastic over the plants until they've grown and touch the top. Remove the weakest seedling.

Mini sweetcorn varieties are harvested before fertilisation, so do not need to be planted in a block and can even be grown as a windbreak! Each plant will produce five or six cobs.

**GROWING:** Plant out indoor-raised plants at the end of May or early June depending on the weather. Stake taller varieties. When roots appear at the base of the stem cover them over with soil. Water well in dry weather; especially when the plants are flowering. Liquid feed when the cobs begin to swell.



Tap the tops of the plants when the male flowers (tassels) open to help pollination; poor pollination will result in poorly or irregularly filled cobs. Supersweet varieties must be isolated or cross-pollination will reduce the sweetness.

If space is at a premium, try the traditional American 'three sisters' technique and plant sweetcorn together with beans and squash (see below). The stout corn plants support the beans and the pumpkins scramble along the ground suppressing the weeds beneath. Plant the corn and pumpkins in the first week of June and follow a week later with the climbing beans.

**HARVESTING:** Test for ripeness when the tassels have turned chocolate brown; squeeze a grain between thumbnail and fingernail - if a watery liquid squirts out then it is unripe, if it is creamy the cob is ready. Twist the ripe cob from the stem.



# Tools

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Vegetable seeds
  - Seed trays
  - Assorted containers
  - Potting compost
  - Growbags
  - Watering can with rose
  - Compound fertiliser
  - Organic matter
  - Mulch
- For more information:  
[www.rhs.org.uk/advice](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice)  
[www.plantforlife.info](http://www.plantforlife.info)

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THE EASY GUIDE TO

# GROWING TENDER VEGETABLES



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## INTRODUCTION

Many of the most worthwhile vegetables you can grow at home are known as 'tender plants' and will not survive outside in cold weather without some form of protection. They are best sown indoors on a warm, sunny windowsill or in a greenhouse - then the seedlings can be planted outdoors when the risk of frost and bad weather has passed. Vegetables that are classed as tender include marrow, courgette, pumpkin, squash, beans and sweetcorn. For advice on growing other vegetables, see The Easy Guides to Salad Crops, Root Vegetables and Hardy Vegetables.

## GERMINATION



Seeds of tender vegetables tend to germinate best between 18-25°C. Marrow, courgette, squash, pumpkin, beans and sweetcorn produce large, quick-growing seedlings, so are generally sown indoors in April or May or outside in June.

**SOWING:** Use a well-drained compost such as seed-raising compost. Follow the instructions on the seed packet about how deep to sow the seeds and how long they will take to germinate. Sow smaller seeds in trays, lightly covered with compost and sprinkled with water. Grow on a sunny windowsill or in a heated propagator or greenhouse. Sow beans in individual 10cm pots and water well by standing pots in a pan of lukewarm water until the surface darkens. Cover with plastic film then transfer to a warm, sunny windowsill. Water seeds to keep the

compost moist - but don't saturate. For a long cropping period, sow a little seed each fortnight, and grow early and late-maturing varieties. **GROWING ON:** Once seedlings are growing healthily and are large enough to handle, prick them out into individual 12cm pots of multipurpose compost. Always hold the seedling leaf - not the stem - and ease out the roots from the base with a spoon. Grow larger seedlings singly, or put two in a cell tray and discard the weak one. **PLANTING OUT:** Follow the seed packet instructions about planting out the seedlings. If plants need to be hardened off, place the pots in a sheltered area outside during the day and bring them in at night or use a cold frame, keeping the lid open during the day and closing it at night.

## THE MARROW FAMILY

Closely related marrow, courgette, squash and pumpkin are all grown in much the same way.

**SOWING:** For earlier crops or in cold regions sow seeds on their side 13mm deep in 7.5cm pots of compost from mid-late April at 18-21°C. Before planting outside in early June, the seedlings need to be hardened off (see Germination, left). Alternatively, wait until late May or early June and you can sow two or three seeds 2.5cm deep outdoors. Cover with cloches or plastic and leave in place for at least two weeks after germination. Thin the seedlings to leave the strongest one.

**GROWING:** They need a sunny, sheltered position and moisture-retentive soil. Make planting pockets 60cm apart for bush varieties or 1.2m apart for trailing types two weeks before you plan to sow or plant. The pockets should be 30cm square and deep and filled with a mixture of compost or well-rotted manure and soil; leave a low mound at the top of the planting medium. Sprinkle a general fertiliser over the soil. Cover the soil with black polythene to help growth and keep the fruit off the soil. Put one plant into the top of the mound.

Pinch out the tips of the main shoots of trailing varieties when



they are 60cm long.

Keep the soil constantly moist by watering around the plants not over them. As they need plenty of water, sink a 15cm pot next to the plants when planting out. Water into this to help ensure the water goes right down to the roots and doesn't sit around the neck of the plant, which can lead to rotting.

Feed every 10-14 days with a high potash liquid fertiliser once the first fruits start to swell. Keep marrows and pumpkins off the soil on a piece of tile or glass.

**HARVESTING:** Harvest marrows, courgettes and summer squashes when the fruit is still quite small - courgettes should be no more than 12.5cm long, marrows 25cm. Pick courgettes regularly to ensure a long cropping period. Leave any pumpkins, squashes and marrows that you want to store over winter to mature on the plant but remove before the first frost strikes.



## BEANS



**SOWING:** For earlier crops, sow in 10cm pots indoors in late April and plant out at the end of May. Sow outdoors from late May to early July, 5cm deep, 23cm apart for runner beans (10cm for French beans), in double rows 45cm apart. Sow a few extra seeds at the end of the rows to fill in any gaps if seeds don't germinate.

**SUPPORTS:** Runner beans need a support to climb up. You can give individual plants a 2.4m bamboo cane. Slope these inwardly so they meet in the middle of the row, then tie them to a horizontal cane. Or use a wigwam of canes. Loosely tie plants to their supports; after that they will climb naturally. Remove the growing tip once the plants reach the top of their support.

For French beans, the bush types may not need supporting, but short twigs can be used to help keep the beans off the soil.

Climbing cultivars need bamboo canes, twiggy sticks or netting to scramble up.

**GROWING:** Keep the soil constantly moist and mulch around plants in June to help conserve moisture. Regularly mist the foliage and flowers, especially in dry weather.

**HARVESTING:** Start harvesting runner beans when the pods are 15-20cm long and before the beans inside begin to swell. French beans are ready when the pods reach 10cm long and snap easily - before the beans can be seen through the pod.

Pick runner and French beans regularly and plants will crop for several weeks. Try to prevent any pods reaching maturity; once they do, plants will stop flowering and no more pods will be set.

