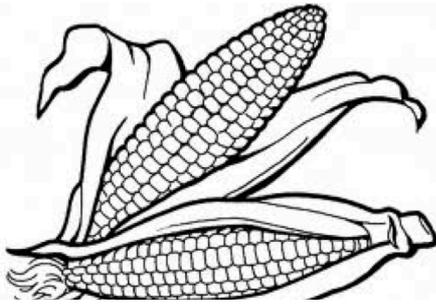


Maize or Sweet Corn



Maize, botanically known as *Zea Mays*, is a cereal plant commonly known as 'corn' or 'sweet corn' in Australia, the United States and Canada, while in Britain, 'corn' is a general term for any staple grain.

Corn is thought to have originated in Central America. It has been a staple food for Native Indians since primitive times. They first used corn gathered from wild plants as a food source. Later, they learned how to grow the crop themselves and the plant came to be called 'Indian corn'. Today the term 'Indian corn' usually refers to corn varieties with multicolored kernels.

The plant, being a cereal grass, looks quite similar to millet and sorghum except that the seed heads are larger. These seed heads are what we call cobs or ears. Each of the ears is covered in even-numbered rows of grains or kernels that are protected by the silk-like threads called 'corn silk' and all are encased in a husk.

We often associate corn with the color yellow, but there are many other varieties of corn featuring kernels of red, blue, pink and black. And not all cobs are of one solid colour, some can be spotted or striped.

It has long been accepted that corn was introduced and distributed outside its native soil to the rest of the world by Christopher Columbus, but recently there has been suggestions that corn may have been cultivated in Asia and Africa at a much earlier date. In any case, by the 16th century, corn has well and truly gained staple status beyond its native land. Today, the largest commercial producers of corn are the United States, China, the Russian Federation, Brazil and Mexico.

The food value and the wide variety of uses of corn make it one of the most important crops grown in the world. Varieties of corn are cultivated in most temperate and tropical areas of the world not only as source of food for people and livestock but also as industrial products such as explosives, construction materials, paints, paper goods, textiles, industrial alcohols, and ethanol.

Corn on the cobs are a delicious and nutritious vegetable, popcorn is the most popular way of preparing whole grains. Coarsely ground grains can be cooked into oatmeal breakfasts, medium coarse grains are cooked into polenta, corn breads etc., and fine corn flour is used in baking.



Fresh baby corns arranged on polystyrene tray

Baby Corn or Candle Corn is a cereal grain taken from maize harvested early while the ears are still immature. Typically it is eaten whole - cob included - in contrast to mature corn, whose cob is considered too tough for human consumption. Baby corn is eaten both raw and cooked and is most common in Asian cuisine.

There are two ways of producing baby corn, either as a primary crop, or as a secondary crop in a planting of 'standard' corn. In the first method, a seed variety is chosen and planted to produce only baby corn. In the second method, the variety is selected to produce 'standard' corn - the second ear from the top of the plant is harvested for baby corn, while the top ear is allowed to mature into the 'standard' corn. Baby corn ears are handpicked as soon as the corn silks emerge from the ear tips. As the grain generally matures very quickly, the harvest of baby corn must be timed carefully to avoid ending up with more mature 'standard' corn. Baby corns are typically 4.5 cm to 8cm in length and 1cm to 2cm in diameter. They are available canned or jarred, or fresh and neatly arranged in polystyrene trays covered with cling wrap.

Unlocking nutrition

When corn was introduced to the Old World, it was embraced both for its growing properties as well as its very palatable taste. However, many of the farmers who adopted corn as the mainstay of their diet began to suffer from a disease of niacin and protein deficiency called *pellagra*. At first this malnutrition seemed mysterious as it did not seem to affect the original cultivators, who often lived on corns. Eventually the mystery was solved: It was discovered that native corn eaters employ a process known as nixtamalization, in which the grain is soaked and cooked in an alkaline solution, usually limewater, in order to chemically release the niacin and amino acids contained within the grain, thereby making them more biologically available and reducing the chance of developing pellagra for those who adopt corn as their main diet.