

Indian corn is colorful sign of autumn

Indian corn - with the pretty kernels of gold, yellow, orange, purple, deep red and other colors - reminds us that fall has arrived when we see it in grocery stores, at farmers' markets and at stands by the side of the road.

Indian corn adds its alluring colors when it is used in swags for the front door and table decorations to mark the beginning of fall. Gosh, I can almost smell the naked leaves burning (oh, to be able to do that again), and taste the cider and donuts we gobble up so readily in this beautiful season.

It's interesting to learn that corn, also called maize or Indian corn, is an annual herb. Zea mays, of the grass family that has been cultivated for so many centuries it can't be traced back to a wild plant.

But there is evidence that corn is an American Indian cereal that was a staple food for many centuries before the coming of the white men. American Indians cultivated a wide variety of corn. To them, this plant, often called Sacred Mother, was considered a gift from the gods.

Corn wasn't known in the Old World until after Columbus discovered America. In 1498, Columbus reported to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain that his brother had "found a dense population entirely agricultural," and at one place passed through 18 miles of cornfields.

CLASSIFICATIONS

Corn is still fed to animals, as is the silage, or stalks on which it grows. The tall stalks can be grown to provide an informal and effective wind-break in the vegetable garden.

Here are some classifications:

- Sweet corn, which humans eat.
- Field corn, with names such as dent corn, which is



Indian corn displayed at a roadside stand is a sign that autumn has arrived.

dent in each kernel when dry. Field corn is generally fed to cattle.

■ Flint corn, which has rock-hard kernels.

■ Flour corn, which makes the best quality flour.

■ Ornamental corn, which can be popped like popcorn. The variety that is so colorful has a higher starch content than sweet corn.

Growing any corn is the same, but the difference is in the harvesting. Popcorn (Indian corn) has been a part of the American diet for years and years, and the pilgrims ate it hundreds of years before it became such a popular snack item. This corn takes longer to grow than does sweet corn.

If you want to try growing popcorn, here are some you might want to try: Tom Thumb, a new England heirloom with short stalks that bear yellow kernels; Bobbitt, a gourmet-quality, tender popcorn with golden yellow kernels; Ruby Red, with burgundy red kernels that are as decorative as they are tasty; Shaman's Blue, with bluish-red, decorative kernels; and Top Pop, with tall stalks that produce yellow kernels. These varieties are suggested in Edward C. Smith's book, *The Vegetable Gardener's Bible* (Storey Books, published in 2000).

Hasland Cressy, author of *The Edible Heirloom Garden* (Periphus, published in 1999), recommends the popcorn variety Strawberry. It takes 80 to 110 days to maturity. The ears are dark red, 1 inch long and strawberry-shaped. The plants grow 5 feet tall and are resistant to corn earworm.

A couple of ornamental corns Cressy recommends are: Squaw Corn, a flint corn with large ears and red, yellow, orange and blue kernels (105 days to maturity); and Hopi Blue, a flint corn with blue kernels (90 days to maturity). Hopi Blue is an old Hopi variety used ceremonially to make blue piki bread that also makes blue tortillas. It is drought tolerant.

HARVESTING

To harvest popcorn, leave the ears on the plant until the kernels are dry. If the weather is very wet, cut the stalks after the husks begin to turn brown and store them in a dry place.

Then when the corn is completely dry (which may take weeks), husk the ears and store them in a dry place, or remove the kernels and store them in a glass jar.

Rub two ears of corn together to release the seeds.

Cressy recommends the following sources for seed:

- Seeds Blum, Idaho City Stage, Boise, ID 83707
- J.L. Hudson, Seedman, P.O. Box 1058, Redwood City, CA 94064
- Johnny's Selected Seeds, Organic Seed & Crop Research, Albion, ME 04910
- Redwood City Seed Co., P.O. Box 361, Redwood City, CA 94064
- Sanctuary Seeds, 1913 Yew St., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V6K 3G3.

Marty Fligley is an advanced master gardener based in Birmingham. You can leave her a message by dialing (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone. Her fax number is (248) 644-1314.

GARDEN CALENDAR

Iris club
The Iris Club of Southeast Michigan will have a general meeting 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 24, at the Royal Oak Senior Community Center, 3500 Marais, three blocks east of Crooks and three blocks north of 13 Mile. The public may attend. Admission is free. Call Ann at (248) 280-0848 for information.

Guest speaker Nancy Szerlag will present the program, *Healthy Gardening Beyond 101*, about how to create a healthy garden for all plants. Szerlag is a master gardener and a master composteer who this past year published two books about growing flowers in Michigan, *Annals for Michigan and Perennials for Michigan*. She won't be selling her books at the meeting, but will sign copies that are brought.

Meadow Brook Hall
Oakland University's Meadow Brook Hall Garden Club will meet 10 a.m. Friday, Oct. 25, in the Coach House at Meadow Brook Hall on the OU campus in Rochester. Non-member donation, \$5.

P.J. Baker, owner of Your Enchanted Garden in Farmdale, will lecture and display basic garden designs for both

sun and shade. Her designs will include trees, shrubs and flowering plants to be used as a background for perennials and annuals. Suggestions to provide color all year long will be given.

Lily bulb sale
The Annual Hybrid Lily Bulb Sale by the Michigan Regional Lily Society will take place 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday Saturday, Oct. 25-26, at Birmingham Congregational Church, 1000 Cranbrook Road at Woodward Avenue in Bloomfield Hills. The sale will feature healthy, reasonable bulbs for your garden. Several offerings haven't been placed in the general market yet.

Water gardening
A free lecture, *The Art of Water Gardening: Construction, Additions and Overwintering Techniques*, will take place 12 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 27, at Sagamore Nursery & Gardens, 470 W. Five Mile in Whitmore Lake. Sagamore staff will give the lecture. Reservations aren't necessary. Call (734) 449-4237 for more information.

Groundcovers
The Michigan School of Gardening offers a variety of classes. Register in advance, as space is limited and some

classes have pre-requisites. Call (248) 4-GARDEN for more information or a complete schedule. The schedule includes Pruning Trees and Shrubs (\$92.50; bring your lunch), Saturdays, Oct. 26 and Nov. 2, at the Historic Detroit Garden Center (Moross House), 1460 E. Jefferson in Detroit and Groundcovers (\$52), Tuesdays, Oct. 29 and Nov. 5, at Golden Walth Nursery, 559 Orchard Lake Road in Pontiac.

Herb study group
The Evening Herb Study Group will meet 7-9 p.m. Monday, Nov. 4, in the auditorium of the University of Michigan Matthaei Botanical Gardens, 1800 Oshtemo Road in Ann Arbor. Three group members will show how to make herbal lye soap, and give helpful hints from their soap-making experience. Attendees are asked to bring an herbal craft, gift or food item, and to explain and show the idea to the group, in preparation for the holiday gift-making season. The next meeting will be Feb. 3, 2003, at Matthaei Botanical Gardens. The public may attend. For more information, call H. Leland at (734) 459-8454 or e-mail hleland@gssservice.com.

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