

Corn Shocks

Introduction

Corn shocks standing in corn fields were once a common site during harvest. This method of drying corn was replaced once mechanical harvesters appeared on the scene. Today corn shocks are more commonly seen in fall displays that may also include pumpkins, gourds and straw bales.

Marketing

Potential markets for corn shocks include farmers' markets, roadside stands and garden centers. Stores that specialize in decorative and craft items may present another marketing option. Grocery stores and other retailers who create store displays may also be interested in purchasing shocks. Some Kentucky producers have had success in selling entire lawn displays that include shocks, along with other fall decoratives. The displays are delivered directly to the customer and set up by the grower.



Market outlook

Markets for ornamental crops, such as shocks, continue to stay strong, especially in areas with larger populations. Fall decorations now rank just behind Christmas decorations in dollars, with the average

American household spending \$45 annually on fall decorations. Ornamental crops can extend a specialty crop producer's cash flow in the late fall months. As with any other specialty crop, however, producers should have a place to market their ornamental crop before beginning production.

Production considerations

Site selection and planting

Ornamental corn or field corn cultivars with strong stalks can be used for shock production. Selecting an ornamental variety with attractively colored ears and stalks provides additional decorative value. Field preparation and growing practices for ornamental-use corn are similar to that of field corn. A well-drained soil is essential. Fields that have been in fescue sod are ideal for production. The field should be plowed several weeks prior to planting and then disked three to four times. If no-till production is planned, a herbicide should be applied prior to planting.

To mature in time for a mid-September harvest, plantings should be made between May 15 and May 25. Plant sufficient seed to produce a plant population of 18,000 to 22,000 stalks per acre for large-eared ornamental varieties, or 24,000 to 26,000 stalks per acre for small-eared selections.

Ornamental corn will freely cross-pollinate with other types of corn making isolation necessary if field or sweet corn crops are also grown. Isolation from other corn varieties can be accomplished by a physical separation of 250 feet or more, or by making sure there is a minimum of 14 days difference in the maturities of the different types.



Pest management

Major insect pests include flea beetles, cutworm, corn borer, and corn earworm. Potential disease problems include damping-off, gray leaf spot, stalk rots and viruses. Crop rotation, seed treatment and the use of resistant varieties can help reduce disease and insect problems. When selling ornamental corn for ears, a good worm control program is necessary to protect the ear tips (similar to sweet corn). Weed control can be achieved by a good crop rotation program and the use of herbicides.

Harvest

Plants are ready to harvest when the leaves are dead but there is still plenty of moisture left in the stalk when cut. Stalks can be cut by hand with a machete, corn knife or tobacco knife and then tied together in the field. Large-scale growers should consider using a corn binder which mechanically cuts and ties the stalks into a bundle. The number of stalks tied together will depend on the size of shock desired. An acre of land should yield approximately 290 shocks with 60 stalks each or 871 shocks with 20 stalks each. A center pole to hold the shock upright can be used if necessary.

Labor requirements

Considerable hand labor can be involved in

shock production. Labor needs per acre are approximately 20 hours for production and 34 hours for hand-harvest and bundling.

Economic considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of seed, and installation of an irrigation system. Production costs for corn shocks are estimated at \$365 per acre. Harvest labor and marketing costs range from \$200 to \$500 per acre and possibly more depending on transportation distance and market type. Total production expenses per acre will range from \$575 to \$875 per acre. Presuming gross returns of \$2,300 per acre, returns to land, capital and management range from \$1,400 to \$1,800 per acre.

More information

- A Comprehensive Guide to Corn Management in Kentucky ID-139 (UK, 2001)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id139/id139.htm>
- Kentucky Integrated Crop Management Manual for Corn (UK, 1997)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/IPM/manuals/ipm2corn.pdf>
- Ornamental Corn Production in Kentucky HO-81 (UK, 1998)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho81/ho81.htm>