UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Okra

Marketing and Market Outlook

Okra is a very minor part of Kentucky's commercial vegetable production. Most commercial okra in Kentucky is grown for farmers markets. Kentucky growers shipped a limited amount of okra for commercial wholesale in 2004. Wholesale okra prices can be very good, but the quantity demanded at these prices is low and growers should have a wholesale market defined before planting large acreages.

Okra is also a desirable vegetable for direct marketing to local restaurants, where chefs are often willing to pay a premium for smaller sizes of okra.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Well-drained, fertile, silt loam soils are most desirable; however, okra will grow on a wide range of soil types as long as they are well-drained. Okra is a hot weather plant and should be seeded only after the soil has warmed up in the spring. This crop does poorly in a cool, wet spring/summer.

Ten to twelve pounds of seed are required to plant an acre. Planet Junior-type push or tractor-drawn seeders can be used effectively. Very high yields have also been obtained with transplanted okra using black plastic mulch and drip irrigation.

Pest management

Okra is highly susceptible to root knot nematodes. Other common diseases include fungal wilts

(Verticillium and Fusarium) and fruit rots. These diseases are controlled primarily by following proper cultural practices, including crop rotation. Insect pests include aphids, Japanese beetles and corn earworms. Scouting to monitor populations can help growers determine when and how often insecticides should be applied. Weeds are controlled with herbicides and cultivation.

Harvest and storage

Pods are cut from the plant when they are 2 to 3½ inches long and are graded according to size. Harvesting should be done on a regular basis to increase yields and to keep the pods from becoming overly mature. During periods of rapid growth, pods may need to be picked every day or every other day. Yields average 8,000 to 10,000 pounds per acre. Okra can be stored for up to ten days under the proper conditions.

Labor requirements

Labor needs for production are about 10 to 15 hours per acre. An estimated 40 hours per acre is needed for hand harvesting, grading and packing. More labor is required for specialty (smaller) size okra.

NEW CROP OPPORTUNITIES CENTER

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of seed, and installation of an irrigation system. Production costs for okra (trickle-irrigated) are estimated at $780 per acre, with harvest and marketing costs at $3,465 per acre.

Total expenses per acre, including both variable and fixed, would come to approximately $4,585. Presuming gross returns of $5,700 per acre, returns to land, capital and management would be approximately $1,115 per acre.

More Information

- Marketing Options for Commercial Vegetable Growers ID-134 (University of Kentucky, 1999) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id134/id134.htm
- Vegetable and Melon Enterprise Budgets (University of Kentucky, 2004) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/AGEcon/pubs/software/budgets_veg_melon.html
- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers ID-36 (University of Kentucky) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.htm