UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Corn Shocks

Introduction

Corn shocks standing in corn fields were once a common sight during harvest. This method of drying corn (*Zea mays*) 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 be interested in purchasing shocks. Some Kentucky producers have had success in selling entire lawn displays that include corn 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 spent, 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 products before beginning production.

Production Considerations

Cultivar selection

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.

Site selection and planting

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 previously 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, an herbicide must be applied prior to planting.

To mature in time for a mid-September harvest, plantings

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are made between May 15 and May 25. Sufficient seed should be planted 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 of cultivars can be accomplished by a physical separation (250 feet or more), or by making sure there is a minimum of 14 days difference in their maturities.

Pest management

Major insect pests include flea beetle, 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 help reduce disease and insect problems. When selling ornamental corn for ears, a good worm management program is necessary to protect the ear tips (similar to sweet corn). Weed control is achieved by an appropriate rotation program and the use of herbicides.

Harvest and storage

Plants are ready to harvest when the leaves are dead, but there is still plenty of moisture remaining in the stalk when it is 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 that 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 to display the shock.

Labor requirements

Considerable hand labor is 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 (2012) for corn shocks are estimated at $630 per acre with harvest labor and marketing costs estimated at $645 per acre. Total production expenses per acre will fall in the $1,300 to $1,400 range. Presuming gross returns of $2,600 per acre, returns to land, capital and management range from $800 to $900. Use of a mechanical binder could eliminate some harvest labor and hassle, and increase returns by at least $200 per acre. Shocks grown to display ornamental corn ears intact may command a higher market price.

Selected Resources

- A Comprehensive Guide to Corn Management in Kentucky, ID-139 (University of Kentucky 2001) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id139/id139.htm
- Kentucky Integrated Crop Management Manual for Corn, IPM-2 (University of Kentucky, 1997) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/IPM/manuals/ipm2corn.pdf
- Ornamental Corn Production in Kentucky, HO-81 (University of Kentucky, 2008) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho81/ho81.pdf

Reviewed by Terry Jones, Extension Specialist (Issued 2005, Revised 2009)
Reviewed by Shawn Wright, Extension Specialist (Revised 2012)
Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (corn shocks in the field) **April 2012**