

# Baby Corn A Viable Production Possibility

Specialty vegetables are a niche in the produce industry not often exploited by the average grower. The production of such crops is often input intensive and the markets are often selective and small. The perfect crop would be one that is easy to produce, requires less input than comparable crops, and is easy to market with local users. Baby corn fits most of the above criteria and is considered by some a specialty vegetable. It is not being currently produced in large quantity in the U.S.; most of the baby corn is imported from Taiwan and Thailand. It is accepted in the restaurant trade as a fresh item and on salad bars as a pickled vegetable and is used quite extensively in oriental cooking. It requires less chemical input than standard sweet corn and matures under a wide range of growing conditions. In fact, any good sweet corn producer is capable of baby corn production. Unlike sweet corn, however, only physical harvesting is currently being employed. For the sweet corn producers relying on hand labor for harvest, this is not a problem.

**Soil conditions:** Optimum conditions for sweet corn result in optimum condition for baby corn. Planting dates should be based on cultivars to be planted (su vs. se, sh2). Results indicate that for central Pennsylvania, the last planting should be before June 20. Lack of soil moisture and high soil temperatures after June 20 usually result in poor stands.

**Fertility:** The short growing season for baby corn (from

50-60 days) allows for a reduction in total nitrogen application. Typical sweet corn recommendations for nitrogen are 110-125 pounds per acre; for baby corn production 80-100 pounds per acre is sufficient because ear fill at maturity is not necessary. It is necessary though to supply enough nitrogen to allow the plant to remain upright through multiple hand harvests. Popcorn varieties do require the upper range of nitrogen (90-100) because of the longer days to maturity (typically 70-90 days). Applying less than 80 pounds per acre of nitrogen is not recommended for baby corn production.

**Variety selection:** Corn varieties that produce multiple ears should be selected for local growing conditions. Most popcorn varieties as well as some sweet corn varieties will produce multiple ears. Ear characteristics should also be considered if the crop is to be sold for fresh use. A slender, tapered ear with a bright yellow color is important to most users. In addition, stalk strength is critical for multiple harvest. Popcorn varieties typically have sturdier stalks.

**Plant population:** Varieties react to spacing by either producing more or fewer ears per plant. It has been demonstrated that with certain varieties more plants can be planted per acre and not affect the yield. A 4-to 6-inch spacing between plants seems to be acceptable for most varieties. Standard spacing

between rows (30-36 inch) is recommended for baby corn production.

**Cultural practices:** Standard sweet corn herbicide applications are acceptable for baby corn production. Insecticide applications, however, can be substantially reduced. The initial treatments for seed corn maggot and flea beetles should be maintained, but for the most part, applications for control of Japanese beetles and corn earworm are not necessary. The crop is harvested before or at silking, eliminating the conditions that attract these pests.

**Harvest:** Harvesting is the most labor intensive part of

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producing baby corn. All harvesting is done by hand because of the lack of a viable mechanical harvester. Because there is no degradation of sugars associated with baby corn, harvest can take place any time during the day. But to maintain product quality, cooling should be considered. If this is not possible, the crop should at least be placed in the shade after harvest in the field and in storage prior to delivery.

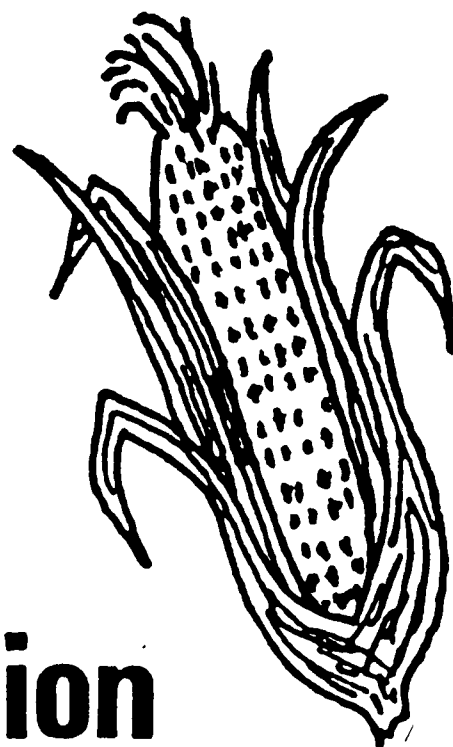
Plant stalks should be held firmly and the ear removed with a minimum of damage to promote the formation of a second or third ear. Plants produc-

ing weak stems should not be selected for baby corn production.

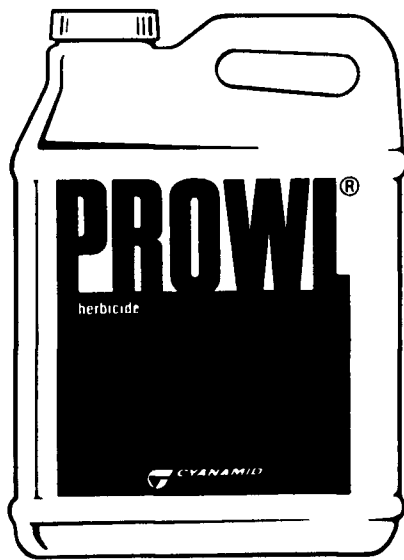
Timing of harvest is based on the physical characteristics of the ear. With long-tapered popcorn varieties, ears with a projected finished length of over 8 inches, harvest should begin with about 1/4-1/2 inch showing above the leaves. If a 4- to 6-inch ear is desired, harvest must occur before silk appearance.

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