

# It Takes Just A Kernel Of Skill To Grow Great Sweet Corn

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Driving around Pennsylvania's back roads to find the perfect ear of sweet corn practically qualifies as a state sport, but a vegetable expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences said backyard gardeners also can grow sweet and tasty ears without much trouble.

"Many sweet corn varieties are resistant to most major corn diseases," said Pete Ferretti, professor of vegetable crops. "Also, in a backyard garden you can walk through the corn and pick off pests. Most corn pests are more interested in acres of corn than they are a garden plot."

Ferretti said Pennsylvania's temperate climate is perfectly suited for growing sweet corn.

Pennsylvania ranks fourth nationally in sweet corn production. In addition, sweet corn thrives in well-drained soils that hold water well, characteristics that describe much of the state's arable soil.

Ferretti said sweet corn is a popular food item primarily in the U.S. Most European, African, and Asian countries grow field corn to feed livestock and poultry or to make cornmeal, which is used for polenta, tortillas, mealy meal, breads, and other products.

"Sweet corn was developed from maize, which is native to the Americas and been cultivated in Central America since 3500 B.C.," Ferretti explained. Seed companies have sold sweet corn varieties since the early 1800s, but they really became popular as garden crops in the 1960s with the development of a very popular sweet variety called Silver Queen.

All sweet corn varieties are grown from seed and can be planted in most of Pennsylvania from about May 15 to July 1, depending upon whether varieties are early-season or late-season. "To enjoy sweet corn throughout the growing season, gardeners should make multiple plantings of early, main

season, and late-maturing varieties," Ferretti said.

Ferretti recommends dedicating at least a 5-foot by 5-foot square of soil for corn, a plot capable of producing about 16 corn plants or around 30 edible ears. "A square plot is ideal because corn is pollinated by the wind and plants are more likely to receive adequate wind flow in a square than in a long row," he said.

Seeds should be planted 1 inch deep about every 4 inches in rows 16 inches apart. As the plants appear, Ferretti recommends pulling out the less vigorous plants. "Ideally, you should have about 16 inches of space between each remaining plant,

which allows for good pollination and space to grow."

Ferretti said corn attracts a wide variety of pests, including corn borers, corn earworms, armyworms, Japanese beetles and corn rootworms. Home gardeners can use Sevin, an all-purpose garden insecticide, or cover the crop with fine mesh row covers. "The row covers will have to be removed when corn tassels appear so the plants can pollinate," he said. "In a small plot, most people can control pests by walking through and removing insects — unless your plot is next to a farmer's giant cornfield."

Ferretti said growing your own corn is the best way to

ensure fresh, sweet-tasting ears. When sweet corn is picked, it immediately starts to convert its sugar content to starch and loses aroma and vitamins. "Corn tastes best when you start the water boil-

ing on the stove and then go out and pick a few ears," Ferretti laughs. "But, if you put the ears in a plastic bag and refrigerate immediately after picking, most varieties will retain good quality for about five days."

## Wissert To Florist Directors

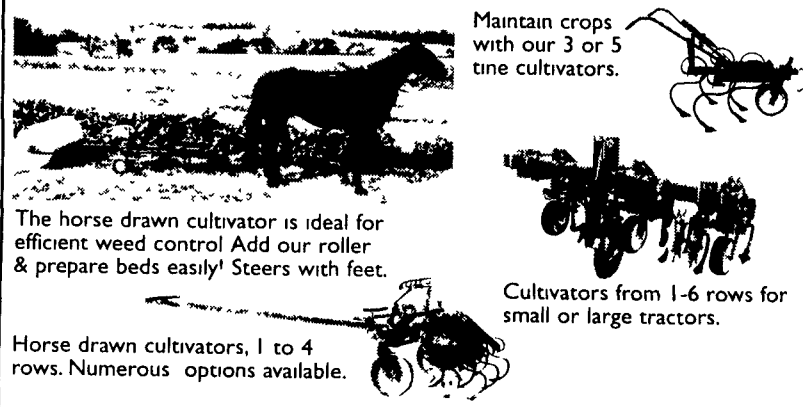
ALFRED, N.Y. — Joan Wissert, assistant professor and chair, Agriculture and Horticulture Department, Alfred State College, was recently elected to the Associated Florists of Greater Rochester, Inc., board of directors.

This group works throughout the year to promote the floral industry. It is the last remaining independent (non-wire service) floral associa-

tion in western New York. The group's most recent project is GardenScape 2000, greater Rochester's floral and garden show.

Wissert's election marks the first time in the organization's history that a college program has been invited to become a member.

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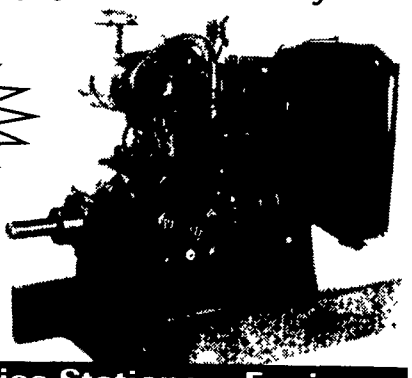
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