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BROOM CORN (*Sorghum bicolor*)

Broom corn is not actually a corn, but a tall, attractive, annual ornamental corn-like grass with a graceful and distinctly tropical appearance. Seed heads with long fibers have been used historically in broom making, but also have use in ornamental crafts and flower arrangements.

ISOLATION REQUIREMENTS:

As a grass, rather than a typical corn, broom corn does not require any additional isolation requirements. It does not cross-pollinate with members of the *Zea mays* species.

SITE SELECTION:

A deep, fertile, well-drained soil with a pH of 6.0–6.8 yields the best quality seed heads. Broom corn has high fertility requirements. Conduct a soil test to determine any necessary amendments; fertilize prior to planting and periodically throughout the season.

Sorghum varieties are relatively tolerant to conditions of high heat and low water, but should receive the rainfall equivalent of 1–1½ inches each week.

DIRECT SEEDING:

Direct seed from the last frost date through mid-June when the soil temperature is at least 60–70°F/15–21°C. Cool soil temperatures can result in decreased germination. In short-season areas, broom corn should be planted as early as possible to ensure adequate time to reach maturity.

Prepare a smooth seedbed for uniform depth placement of seed. Sow seeds ⅛–½ inches deep, 2 inches apart in rows 18–36 inches apart. For a continuous harvest, plant every 2 weeks until mid-June.

Once plants are 4 inches tall, thin to 8–12 inches apart, depending on the intended use. A wider spacing between plants promotes thicker stalks.

DISEASES:

Rust is a fungal pathogen that occurs on the leaves of broom corn in the form of raised, dark red blemishes. The blemishes can primarily be found on older leaves. Alternating applications of a copper fungicide and OxiDate® can offer some measure of disease prevention and control.

ANIMAL PESTS:

The only major pest challenge is to prevent the seed heads from being eaten by birds. Shield with bird netting if birds become an issue. Bird Scare Flash Tape may also have some affect in repelling birds.

HARVEST:

Harvest any time after the seed heads have developed. Color fully develops as the seeds mature, but may be harvested at any stage of maturity. By harvesting at different times, there will be variation in the color of the seed heads. Delay your harvest if black seeds are desired. The plants will yield 5–12 stems each, depending on the variety grown. Hang or stand to dry.

USES:

Excellent cut or dried flower. Seed heads used for ornamental crafts, arrangements, and in traditional broom making. For back of the border or as a fast-growing screen. When left unharvested, the seeds can be used as a winter food source for wildlife.

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