

How to Grow & Use Glass Gem Corn – The Most Beautiful Corn in The World

Glass gem corn perfectly combines beauty and utility that can be achieved through selective plant breeding. The results are not synthetic. This rainbow-colored corn is the result of human action working in collaboration with nature. An excellent example of what we can achieve when we do not fight against nature but work in harmony. Glass gem corn celebrates the variety of heritage crops and biodiversity. The more diversity there is in our food systems, the more resilient they will be. These types of heritage corns are higher in protein and lower in carbohydrates than the typical corn available today.



What is Glass Gem Corn? Glass gem corn is an amazingly vibrant strain of rainbow-colored corn. It is a type of ‘flint corn’ which is grown not for eating off the cob, but for making popcorn, or grinding into corn flour. With ‘flint corn’, the corn is left on the plants to dry. The kernels will eventually begin to lose their shine and vibrancy and dry out. They are harvested only when the kernels are as hard as flint – which is where the name ‘flint corn’ comes from. Of course, this corn is also grown for its ornamental appeal.

The History Behind Glass Gem Corn But while the bright colors are what first draw people in, it is the interesting history behind this strain that really inspires. The story of glass gem corn begins way back before the 1800s, when native American tribes grew ancestral types of corn. The native tribes knew and grew a range of types of corn, using traditional, sustainable practices. Corn was a staple of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, from South America to the Great Lakes. It is believed to have originally been domesticated in Mexico and may be one of the oldest agricultural crops in the world. Different tribal groups created distinct strains, which were very much tied up with their distinct heritage and self-identity.

Carl Barnes – The Reclaiming of Lost Heritage Corn Varieties Over time, as tribes were disenfranchised and relocated by European settlement, some ancestral strains of corn were lost. Then, an Oklahoma farmer, Carl Barnes (1928-2016) set out to grow older corn varieties as a way to reconnect with his Cherokee heritage. Though growing older varieties, Barnes was able to isolate ancestral strains that had been lost to tribes when they were relocated to what is now Oklahoma. He began to exchange ancient corn seed with people he had met and befriended all over the country. He was able to reconnect elders from various tribes with specific, traditional corns, which helped their people to reclaim their cultural and spiritual identities. The corn literally represented their blood line, their language – was central to their sense of who they were. To those he met and befriended, he was known by his spiritual name – White Eagle. Barnes began selecting seed from the most colorful cobs. Over time, this selective breeding led to the creation of some amazing rainbow-colored corn. (Originally, according to one account, a cross involving Pawnee miniature popcorns with Osage Red flour and Osage ‘Greyhorse’.) But far more than this, he is now remembered with gratitude for his work to collect, preserve and share native corn varieties.

Continuing the Work A fellow farmer named Greg Schoen met Barnes in 1994, The rainbow corn crossed with other traditional varieties and new strains were created. Over time, Schoen was able to make the corn ever more vibrant and vivid. ‘Glass Gems’ was the name Schoen gave to the stunning blue-green and pink-purple corn he grew in 2007.

Where to Grow Glass Gem Corn Like other heritage corns, glass gem corn needs plenty of warmth and sunlight to grow well. In an area of full sun, somewhere relatively sheltered not exposed to high wind. In more northerly climates, you may have more success if you grow it in a high tunnel or greenhouse structure. As a ‘flint’ corn it will require a longer season to come to maturity. It is important to plant fertile soil, moist but free-draining and ample moisture must be available through the growing season.

Sowing Glass Gem Corn If you are up against a short growing season then it is a good idea to sow your sweetcorn early – indoors – before transplanting your young plants outside. Be sure not to sow or transplant too early. You should be absolutely sure that all risk of frost and nighttime chill has passed before you sow or plant these crops in your garden. Soil should have warmed to at least 60 degrees F. Corn should not be sown in long rows, but rather in blocks. Since this is a wind pollinated crop, pollination rates and yield will be higher if you plant in blocks, with at least three rows, rather than in one long, straight line. This corn should be planted at a spacing of around 6 inches between plants.

Three Sisters Planting Native Americans often planted three different crops together, corn, beans and squash, or pumpkins. Like sisters, each of these plants has different characteristics, and like sisters, these plants can help one another in various ways. The beans are a nitrogen fixer which will help to feed the ‘family’ of plants. Squash, planted around the outside of the bed, will shade the soil, helping to retain moisture and reduce weeds.

Caring for Glass Gem Corn Mulch well around your glass gem corn with an organic mulch to provide slow release fertilization throughout the growing season. Make sure that your corn gets adequate water throughout the season, and feed with a general-purpose organic liquid feed once cobs begin to form. Corn will generally require around an inch of water per week.

Harvesting Glass Gem Corn With ‘flint corn’, the corn is left on the plants to dry. The kernels will eventually begin to lose their vibrancy and dry out. They are harvested only when the kernels are as hard as flint – which is where the name ‘flint corn’ comes from. Unlike sweetcorn, which is eaten while juicy and fresh, flint corn is harvested in fall, when the outer husks are dry and brown. To remove the husked cobs from the stalk, twist the husks while pulling downwards with one fluid movement. After removing the husked cobs from the stalk, peel back the dried, papery husks to reveal the exciting colors within. You can remove the husks altogether or leave them on for decoration. The corn kernels will have begun to dry on the plant. But you should now continue this process. Spread out your corn cobs on a drying rack. Turn them once a day to ensure that they dry out evenly. Your corn will be fully dry when you cannot press your fingernail into the kernels, and they are as ‘hard as flint’. When it is completely dry, you can keep your glass gem corn for many years. It will also be ready for further processing if required.

Using Glass Gem Corn Of course, you could simply use your glass gem corn ornamentally, but if you are interested in keeping heritage varieties alive and maintaining crop diversity, set some of the seed aside to grow in your next year. By selecting the most vibrantly colored kernels, in the shades you desire, you can selectively breed new versions of this rainbow corn for yourself and create new strains for your plant growing adventures.

This type of corn is not eaten fresh, but you can process it for eating in several different ways. Most commonly, this type of corn is used as popcorn. Of course, once they pop, you will only see tiny specks of their former colors, and they will have expanded into the fluffy white popcorn clouds. You can also grind as cornmeal or dry to use in soups and stews. Finally, you could also consider treating your glass gem corn with an alkaline to make classic hominy. Hominy corn can be used to make grits.

The attached Glass Gem seeds was grown by Daphne Singingtree in a small three sister’s patch in her backyard in Eugene, Oregon. She has been growing Glass Gem corn for the last few years to give as gifts due to its beauty and to encourage growing heritage corn to promote food resilience.

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