

How to Grow Oats

<http://www.gardeningblog.net/how-to-grow/oats/>

Days to germination: 7 to 20 days

Days to harvest: Full season

Light requirements: Full sun

Water requirements: Frequent watering

Soil: Well-drained

Container: Not suitable

Introduction

There are a few different varieties of oats available, with the 2 most popular being white oats and red oats. White oats are grown more in the northern areas, whereas red oats are grown in warmer areas with mild winters.

For anyone growing oats on a small scale, hull-less oats are ideal because they need a lot less processing after harvest time. Having to mill the oats to remove the hulls is usually beyond the scope of the average gardener, so look for hull-less oats.

Though oats and other small grains are definitely suitable for the home gardeners, you will need to have more space for them than you do for other fruits or vegetables. But that doesn't mean you need acres to dedicate to your oats in order to get a useful crop.

Oats are a good source of fiber, protein and carbohydrates. Oats cannot be eaten raw, and they can take a while to cook when used whole. Rolled or cut oats will cook faster. They can be used in granola, baked goods or just plain as oatmeal. In savory recipes, you can even use whole oats in place of rice though they take longer to cook.

Starting from Seed

Your average garden center may not carry oat seed, so you might have to find a local agricultural store or farming co-op. Tell them how much space you are going to plant, and they should be able to tell you how many pounds of seed you will need.

Oats should be planted as early in the spring as you can get them out. To help reduce the weed levels in your field, you should try to do a cultivation in the fall, to bring up any seeds to the surface for the winter cold to kill. Dig again in the spring closer to when you're going to do your planting.

You should plant your oats in a sunny location where it will be easy to access water for them. Oats need more water than most other grains, and you will probably have to water them if there are too many days between rainstorms.

Though they like moisture, oats will not grow well in low-lying areas where water accumulates. The soil needs to be well draining.

To sow your seeds, you just broadcast them out over the soil. For a small area (like a quarter acre or less), you can just do it by hand. Try to get the seeds evenly distributed. If you are going to be growing a larger area, you can get tools to help you spread the seeds. It saves your arm and will spread them more evenly.

Unfortunately, you will also have to go and cover all that seed once you're done. If you leave it all on the surface, you will surely lose most of it to the birds. Go over the entire area with a rake and turn over the soil to get the seeds at least an inch under the surface. One trick is to do your seeding right before an expected heavy rain. The water will beat the seeds into the wet soil, and do a pretty good job of covering without any more effort on your part.

Growing Instructions

Though they may seem like a lot of work to process (see below) there is little work to be done during the growing season. Because oats are grown in a dense patch, you can't really get in to weed them and the plants generally need little care.

You will need to give them a watering when the weather gets dry, which can be difficult if you are growing a large patch of them. But they don't do well in dry conditions, so either you water your oats or risk losing them.

Pests and Disease

Other than birds and rodents stealing your grain, there are few pests to worry about when growing oats. There are some rust fungi that can attack oats, particularly if the weather is very humid. You will see patches or streaks of rust on the leaves and stalks of your oats. There are fungicide products you can use, as long as you aren't spraying right before harvest time.

Harvest and Storage

Oats will be between 2 and 5 feet tall when they are mature. The leaves should be starting to turn brown, and the oat kernels should be in what is called the "dough" stage. When you squeeze a kernel, there should be no milky fluid left (its still in the milk stage then). The kernels should be soft, and can be dented with a fingernail. If you wait until they are hard (also called "dead ripe", you will likely lose a lot of grain with all the handling during harvest.

To harvest your oats, just cut the seed heads from the stalks. You can cut the stalks anywhere along the length, but the higher up you cut, the less straw you'll have to deal with when you are threshing. A sharp knife or garden sickle will work fine.

Once the seed heads are harvested, you need to let them cure. How long this takes will really depend on the weather, and it can be several days to several weeks. Store your cut oats outside if it's not expecting to rain, or indoors where it is warm and dry. When the kernels are dead ripe, you can start to thresh out the oats.

Spread out a sheet, and use whatever means you wish to beat the seed heads until all the oats are loose from the stalks. You can stomp on them (but cover with another sheet if you do this), or use something like a plastic baseball bat or a short length of stiff garden hose. Once all the seed heads have been crushed, you just need to separate the oats from the left over pieces of stalk (called the chaff).

The traditional way to do this, is to drop handfuls of the oats and chaff from several feet up into a bowl or bucket on a windy day. The wind blows out the loose chaff, and only the oats remain in the bucket. You can get up to 10 bushels of finished grain from just a quarter-acre field.

Store whole oats in an air-tight container away from the light. They should last up to 3 months. Their high-fat content keep oats from storing longer, and they will go rancid.