

# How To Grow & Use Glass Gem Corn – The Most Beautiful Corn In The World

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There are times when you find a plant that perfectly combines beauty and utility. Glass gem corn is one of the best and most stunning examples of this phenomenon.

The breathtaking colours of these corn cobs must be seen to be believed. But they are more than just a novelty.

Glass gem corn is the perfect example of the interesting results that can be achieved through selective plant breeding. The results are not synthetic. This colorful corn is the result of human action. But it is the result of human action working in collaboration with nature.

It could be viewed as an excellent example of what we can achieve when we do not fight against nature, but work in harmony with nature to achieve our goals.

Nature is infinitely varied and infinitely beautiful. By harnessing and taming it in our gardens, we can grow an amazing variety of food.

Glass gem corn is something special, an example that celebrates the variety of heritage crops, and shows us that we can grow far more than just the same old boring commercial varieties in our gardens.

If you've already grown some interesting heritage varieties of common fruits and vegetables in your garden, this crop could be something new to try.

Biodiversity is hugely important. We should always look to protect and increase plant and animal diversity in nature. But we should also aim to improve biodiversity of food crops.

By growing a variety of interesting heritage and heirloom crops, we can help retain diversity in our food. The more diversity there is in our food systems, the more resilient they will be.

## What is Glass Gem Corn?

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Glass gem corn is an amazingly vibrant strain of rainbow coloured corn. It is a type of 'flint corn' which is grown not for eating off the cob, but for making popcorn, or grinding into cornflour.

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.

It first sprung to public attention back in 2012, when images were posted online and became something of an internet sensation.

Many more people since then have been drawn to look into this beautiful colored corn and to look into growing it for themselves.

## **The History Behind Glass Gem Corn**

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But while the bright colors are what first draw people in, it is the interesting history behind this strain that really inspires. In order to see the true beauty in glass gem corn, you need to learn a little about where it came from.

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**

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Over time, as tribes were disenfranchised and relocated by European settlement, some ancestral strains of corn were lost.

Then, some time in the later 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an Oklahoma farmer called 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 truly amazing rainbow-colored corn.

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

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A fellow farmer named Greg Shoen met Barnes in 1994, and was blown away by his amazing rainbow-coloured corn. Barnes gave Shoen some of that rainbow seed the following year and Shoen went on to sow them. The two remained close and Shoen received more samples of the rainbow seed over the years.

Schoen moved to New Mexico in 1999, and grew only small quantities of the colorful corn. Then, in 2005, he began to grow larger plots near Santa Fe. He also grew other, more traditional varieties.

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.

It was an image of this crop that went viral in 2012 and turned this strain into an internet sensation.

## Where To Grow Glass Gem Corn

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Like other heritage corns, glass gem corn needs plenty of warmth and sunlight over the summer months to grow well.

It should be positioned in an area of full sun. And ideally somewhere relatively sheltered where it will not be exposed to high wind.

If you are trying to grow your corn in more northerly climes, with a shorter growing season, you may have more success if you grow it in a high tunnel or greenhouse structure.

Note that this glass gem corn is a ‘flint’ corn. This means it will require a longer season to come to maturity. So it may not be the easiest thing to grow where the season is short. (Consider trying shorter season sweetcorn bred for a short growing season and cooler conditions instead.)

It is important to plant the sweetcorn in fertile soil. But it can grow well in a range of soil types and at a range of pH levels. The soil should be moist but free-draining and ample moisture must be available through the growing season.

## Sowing Glass Gem Corn

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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.

Consider using biodegradable plant pots (or toilet roll tubes) as modules to minimise root disturbance.

Be sure not to sow or transplant too early. You should be absolutely sure that all risk of frost and night time 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.

All heritage corn varieties will thrive if you grow them as indigenous groups across the Americas did. Native tribes often grew corn in polycultures, as part of the famous ‘three sisters’ planting plan.

### **Three Sisters Planting Scheme**

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Native Americans often planted three different crops together, and called them the ‘three sisters’.

These three plants were 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.

Glass gem corn, like other corn varieties, will provide a support for beans to climb.

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.