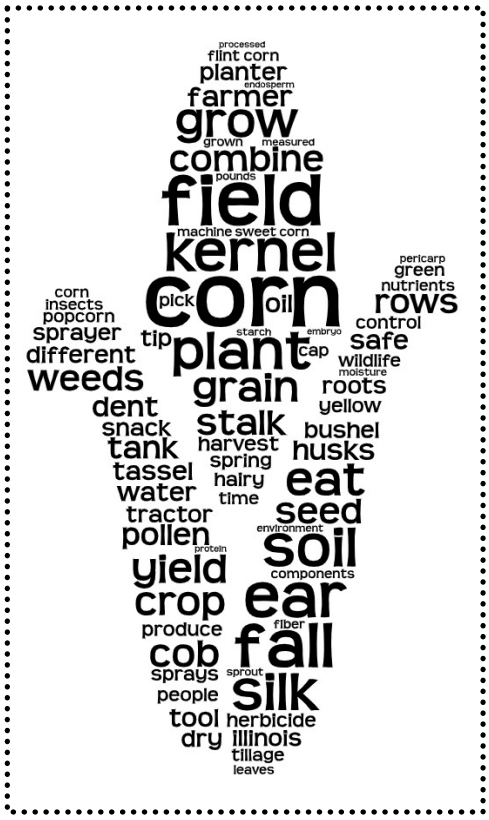
How Farmers Grow Field Corn



Corn, also known as **maize**, is a plant in the grass family. It was developed from a wild grass called teosinte (TAY•oh•sin•tee) in central Mexico 7,000-10,000 years ago.

In Illinois and the United States, **farmers** grow more corn than any other crop. Most of the corn they grow is **field corn**. The corn we eat as a vegetable is known as **sweet corn**, and it is different than field corn. **Popcorn**, which we eat as a snack, is yet another kind of corn. The corn we often use for fall decoration is called **flint corn**, which is also called Indian corn. These kinds of corn all look very different from one another. Field corn **kernels** are yellow and most have a **dent** on top.

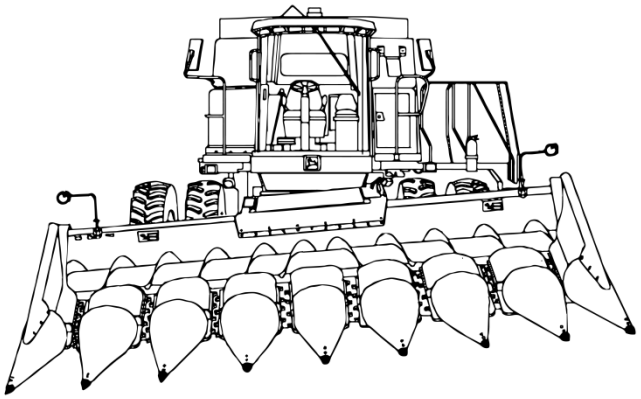
Farmers plant corn in the spring when soil temperatures reach about 50 degrees Fahrenheit. A **planter** is used to plant the seeds. The planter is pulled by a **tractor**. It places the seeds about 2 inches deep in the soil, at a precise distance apart, in perfect rows.

Once the corn begins to grow, farmers watch their fields carefully for **weeds**. Weeds steal water and nutrients from the **roots** of the corn plants, meaning the corn will not grow well and won't produce as much grain in the fall. A **sprayer** is used to control weeds. The sprayer sprays a mixture of water and herbicide on the field. Used properly, the herbicide is safe for the **environment**, wildlife, and people. It will kill weeds, but not the corn. Some farmers use a tillage tool which digs into the soil between the rows of corn to uproot weeds.

By late July, the corn plants are taller than an adult person. Each plant, also called a **stalk**, is starting to produce an **ear** about halfway up the plant. The ear has greenish, hairy-looking strands growing out the end. These strands are called **silks**.

At the top of each plant, a **tassel** forms. The tassel produces pollen. When pollen falls on the silks below, kernels will form on the ear. Every strand of silk leads to a kernel. If a silk is damaged by insects so that pollen cannot reach it, a kernel will not form.

By fall, the corn begins to die and turn light brown. When the plants have died and the kernels are dry, it is time for harvest. A **combine** is used to pick the corn. This huge machine cuts each stalk, pulls off the ear, removes the husks from the ear, and takes the kernels off the **cob**. The kernels collect in the combine's grain tank, while the stalks, leaves, husks, and cobs stay on the field to become part of the soil.



Multiple computer screens inside the combine tell the farmer exactly where he or she is in the field, the moisture level of the grain, and the **yield**. Yield is the amount of corn harvested per acre. Yield is measured by the **bushel**. One bushel of corn weighs 56 pounds.

When the combine's grain tank is full, the combine driver will unload the corn into a **grain cart** which is pulled by another tractor. The driver extends the combine's auger arm, which is a long tube through which the grain flows. The grain cart operator drives through the field alongside the combine as it unloads so that the combine doesn't have to stop.

Corn is widely grown and used because of the components of its kernels. The **pericarp** and **tip cap** are mostly **fiber**. The **embryo**, which is the part of the seed which can sprout and grow, is high in oil. The largest part of the kernel is the **endosperm**, which contains **starch** and **protein**. All these components can be separated and processed for thousands of different uses, making corn an extraordinarily valuable crop.

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