

BABY CORN CULTIVATION

**By
Lim Lee Lee**

Introduction

Baby corn cultivation was first pioneered by the Bidayuh at Kampung Peros, Bau in the early 1980s. The farmers grew maize as an off-season crop in wet paddy fields and on the hill slopes during the main paddy season. The baby corn was harvested as immature cobs at a very young stage from the maize plant. Baby corn was a fast lucrative cash crop for the farmers.

Due to popular market demand, baby corn is now cultivated by many farmers on a small scale throughout Sarawak. Today, this vegetable is available to consumers throughout the year.

Baby corn is now a delicacy in many eating outlets. It is a very safe vegetable to consume. Baby corn can be eaten fresh or cooked as mixed vegetable.

Site selection

Baby corn can be grown on most soil types. It grows best on well drained, fairly fertile soils with an ideal soil pH of 5.5- 6.5. An ideal area for growing baby corn is an open flat to gently undulating land.

Land preparation

The field is prepared by removing all existing vegetation followed by ploughing. No-tillage method of land preparation is also practised by some farmers. Prepared fields are basal-dressed with 10 mt/ha of well decomposed chicken dung and 1.0 mt/ha dolomite at 1-2 weeks prior to seed sowing.

General cultivation

Baby corn is planted from seeds purchased from commercial seed suppliers. Varieties readily available are Pacific Hybrid baby corn 421, Thai baby corn and baby corn 123. The seeds are direct seeded to open field or ex-vegetable beds. 2-3 seeds are dibbled into each planting hole. The plants are planted in rows and spaced 30-45 cm within rows and 50-60 cm between rows, giving a planting density of 74,000-130,000 plants/ha. The seeding rate is about 40-45kg seeds/ha.

Compound fertiliser, 15:15:15 is applied to the plants at a rate of 200-250 kg/ha two weeks after sowing followed by another round of 150-200 kg/ha of the same fertiliser two to three weeks later. Plants may be mounded after the second fertiliser application to support plant growth and control weeds.

Crop management

Detasselling (removal of male flowers) is made before flowering or when the crop is 40-45 days old. This will make harvesting faster and give better cob development and quality.

Pest and disease problems are uncommon in baby corn cultivation because of the short crop cycle. Therefore, baby corn is a very safe vegetable to consume as hardly any pesticide sprays are required.

Weeds have to be controlled early to reduce crop-weed competition. Pre-emergent herbicides such as atrazine and alachlor are sprayed onto the soil immediately after planting. For broad-leaved weeds, 2,4-D Amine sprays can be used 2-3 weeks after planting.

Harvesting and postharvest handling

Baby corn can be harvested about 50 days after planting and the harvesting period lasts about 2-3 weeks. Harvesting of baby corn is done by holding the stalk firmly with one hand; twist and pull the cob downward with the other hand. The cobs are harvested when the silk length is about 2-10cm. Each plant can produce 2-4 baby corns. Farmers should harvest the cobs everyday during the harvesting period otherwise the cobs will become too big and not marketable. The stalks can be fed to the livestock.

Baby corn can be sold as unpeeled or dehusked cobs. For dehusked cobs, $\frac{3}{4}$ length of the cob sheath (skin) is removed to expose the miniature cob. The dehusked cobs are then put into clear plastic bags with ventilation holes. A packet of 10-12 baby corn is sold at RM 2.00. Unpeeled cobs are also sold at the same price for 10-12 cobs/bundle.

Unpeeled baby corn can keep for a week at ambient temperature while dehusked baby corn can be kept in the cold room to maintain freshness for three weeks.

Financial returns

The average production of baby corn is 150,000 - 260,000 cobs/ha/season. The estimated production cost inclusive of wages is RM 4,500/ha/season. At a farm-gate price of RM 0.05/cob and yield of 200,000 cobs, the gross income is RM10,000 per hectare per season. The net income of baby corn planting is RM5,500 per hectare per season.



Baby corn planting on ex-vegetable beds



Tasselling of baby corn



Silking of baby corn



Freshly harvested baby corn



Dehusked baby corn



Dehusked baby corn ready for sale

*The article was contributed by Senior Research Officer Lim Lee Lee
(e-mail: limll@sarawak.gov.my).*