

Organic, worm-free sweet corn

Fresh sweet corn from the garden is one of the joys of summer.

But the flavor of sweet corn loses its appeal when you open the husks and see a big earworm staring at you!

We have tools to control earworms (shown) and borers. Insecticides such as Sevin can be used, but most families avoid using toxic chemicals in their gardens. There is a safer way.

You can start by monitoring for the egg-laying moths using a pheromone trap. This is available from Great Lakes IPM and other companies for just over \$50, and will last for several years. The advantage to monitoring for pests is you don't have to treat your plants if there are no earworm moths flying near your garden. If this is too costly an option, just assume the moths are flying when corn silks are appearing.

A combination of mineral oil and *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki* (Btk), works best. Btk is a natural bacterial insecticide that is widely available; it is sold under such trade names as Dipel and Thuricide. The oil-Btk mix is sprayed on the silks to kill the

hatching earworms while they tunnel into the ears.

Mineral oil or vegetable oil will work by itself, but you will have better success if you mix it with Btk. A formulation of 1 part Btk with 20 parts oil is recommended. Apply 5 drops from an eyedropper to the silk of each ear.

Zea-later is available from Johnny's Selected Seeds. This oil-Btk mix comes with a trigger spray that shoots out the exact amount needed for each ear.

Timing is most critical. Spray when silks have reached their full length and began to wilt and turn brown (this is 5–6 days after 50% of the corn has begun to show silks). Earlier applications can interfere with pollination and lead to poorly filled ears. Later applications will lead to poor control, as the earworms will have escaped into the ears by then.


Borers can be a problem, too. Look for shotholes in the whorls at the time the tassels begin to appear. If you see 15% of more of the plants showing damage, spray inside the whorls with Btk or spinosad (another organic product).

You may avoid earworm and borer problems by planting early varieties and planting early in spring. In this way, your crops will mature before the egg-laying moths arrive.

'Trinity' is an outstanding early bicolor variety. It freezes well and tastes much sweeter and is more tender than any frozen corn you buy at the grocery store.



Corn earworm (above) and pheromone trap.

Treated seed can be planted when soil temperatures reach 60 degrees and untreated seed can be planted with soil temperatures reach 65 degrees. To test soil temperatures, wait until 9 a.m. in the morning. Soil thermometers are available in seed catalogs and at major garden centers. 

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