

The Life of Sorghum by Geri L. Kline, M.S. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Assistant
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The sorghum belt stretches from South Dakota to South Texas and it can be grown as a grain, forage or sweet crop. There are different types of sorghum including: grain, forage, biomass and sweet. Grain sorghum comes in many shapes and sizes and can be used for human consumption and livestock feed. Forage sorghum can be used for grazing, hay production or silage. Biomass sorghum is the tallest of all the sorghums that can reach a height of 20 feet in a normal growing season. Those hybrids are used mostly for the production of bioenergy. Sweet sorghum is grown primarily for sorghum syrup and is harvested for the stalks rather than the grain. It is crushed like sugarcane to produce a syrup. Since sorghum is a high-energy and drought-tolerant crop it does well in Texas. It is planted in March or April or when soil temperatures exceed 65 degrees and harvested in July or August. Sorghum is susceptible to many pests including: sugarcane aphids, fall armyworms, corn earworms and stink bugs. In 2013 farmers lost up to 50 percent of grain sorghum yields in fields infested with sugarcane aphids. A few diseases that sorghum can become infected with are seeding blights, leaf rust, copper spot and charcoal rot.

Farmers plant grain sorghum in rows at depths of 1-2 inches deep depending on what type of soil they have. Corn and grain sorghum resemble each other in nutrient needs. They both need large amounts of nitrogen and moderate amounts of phosphorus and potassium. But corn and grain sorghum are different in other aspects. Corn is cross-pollinated and sorghum is self-pollinated.

Grain sorghum can be one of the most difficult grains to harvest. It is harvested with a combine. Farmers have to be certain that the grain is ready to be harvested. Grain sorghum matures from the top of the head downward to the base. When the grain is mature the moisture content is usually between 25 and 30 percent and grain elevators usually discount it if the moisture content is above 14 percent due to the high cost of drying the grain. This means that farmers will watch the weather to try to harvest the grain when moisture content is low. High-moisture corn is much looser than high-moisture grain sorghum, which means that air circulation can't get through the grain sorghum as easily. This can cause heating, molding and sprouting problems. Another difference between grain sorghum harvesting and corn harvesting is that sorghum stalks are usually much wetter than corn stalks. This can cause sorghum stalks and green leaf material to be pulled into the combine and make clumps, which will increase harvest losses.

Sorghum is a versatile crop and is used for human consumption, livestock feed and green energy. Sorghum is becoming more popular because it is gluten-free and can be used in baked goods, chips and other foods. Remember to take pride in agriculture and thank a farmer/rancher.

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