

# Hybrid Pearl Millet Seed

## Hybrid Pearl Millet

Hybrid Pearl millet is a warm season annual grass that is best known in the U.S. as a forage crop. Estimated U.S. area planted to pearl millet for forage use is 1.5 million acres. New varieties of pearl millet, however, are being developed for use as a grain crop. These new hybrid types of pearl millet are shorter in stature for easier combining, and higher in seed yield. Use of pearl millet grain on a commercial basis only began in the U.S. in the early 1990s, but has led to production on several thousand acres in Georgia and Florida. Most of this initial pearl millet production has been for poultry feed, although the crop shows good feed potential for other types of livestock as well. Some pearl millet has been grown for birdseed. Pearl millet was domesticated as a food crop in the tropical region of East Africa at least 4,000 years ago. Its use as a food grain has grown over the centuries, with an estimated 64 million acres of pearl millet being grown in Africa and India (this acreage is equivalent to the total U.S. corn crop). The crop is used for a variety of food products, and is even made into a type of beer.

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## Plant Description

Pearl millet [*Pennisetum glaucum* (L.) R.Br.] grown for grain has a growth habit similar to sorghum. Pearl millet is a warm season crop, planted in early summer when soils have warmed up. The flowers and seeds occur in a spike at the end of the stem or tillers, looking somewhat like a cattail or bullrush head. Including the grain head, the plant will typically be about 4 to 5 feet tall in Missouri, although height can vary from 3 to 6 feet depending on variety and growing conditions. The crop is primarily cross pollinated, and following pollination, it takes a flower about 30 more days to develop into a mature seed. Grain heads will mature a few weeks prior to leaf dry down, but seed shatter is not usually a problem. When planted around June 1 in Missouri, it will usually be ready to harvest in late September.

Like any grain crop, pearl millet will yield best on fertile, well drained soils. However, it also performs relatively well on sandy soils under acidic soil conditions, and when available soil moisture and soil fertility are low. This adaptation reflects pearl millets origin in the Sahel region of Africa, where growing conditions are difficult. Pearl millet appears to have relatively fast root development, sending extensive roots both laterally and downward into the soil profile to take advantage of available moisture and nutrients. The crop does best when there are plenty of hot days, although it has been successfully produced in cooler areas such as North Dakota. In general, pearl millet fits in the same areas of adaptation as sorghum (milo), except that it is somewhat more drought tolerant and has a little earlier maturity. It also tolerates low soil pH better than sorghum.

## Planting

Soil temperatures should be at least 65°F or warmer before pearl millet is planted. Seeding rate is recommended at 4 - 25 pounds per acre. An exact seeding rate is not critical, because pearl millet can partially compensate for a poor stand by increasing the number of tillers. Seeding depth should be 1/2 to 1 inch deep. No-till seeding is feasible, although the shallower seeding depth compared to corn or soybeans can make proper control of planter depth (through surface residue) more challenging.

## Utilization

Although pearl millet was developed as a food crop and is still primarily used this way in Africa and India, its grain is most likely to be used for animal feed in the U.S. Several studies have been conducted on its potential for various types of animals, including poultry, ducks, cows, hogs, and catfish. In general, it performs comparably to corn in the diet for these animals, with small advantages in certain situations.

Typically the protein content of pearl millet is 45% higher than feed corn and is also 40% higher in lysine. This higher protein and other feed characteristics have helped drive the interest in the grain by poultry producers and other livestock producers. Pearl millet is much lower in tannin than sorghum and its seed is about half the weight of a sorghum seed.