

Sonora wheat, small plot, planting suggestions

These planting suggestions apply to spring (short season) drought tolerant wheat varieties to be planted in the California Mediterranean climate and generally grown without irrigation. Old-fashioned landrace varieties were always grown "organically", without irrigation, and should be planted with a generous spacing of seeds, so that each plant can develop fully. This wheat will grow to a height of 3-5 feet. Therefore, too early, or too dense planting, extra irrigation, and extra fertilization will cause the stems to be too tall, and lodge (fall over). Wheat needs to be given a somewhat tough environment to provide a high protein wheat grain on a strong straw. We have seen the best grain grown in a highly fertile organic plot that was not irrigated.

The time of planting to avoid over growing and disease, is into a warming season; that is, after the coldest and wettest part of the winter has passed. Generally, there is a dry period when the ground is workable without being muddy, at some time from January onwards.

Ideally these short season varieties will "head up" by early May when the rainfall generally ceases, and the weather becomes hot and dry. If your climate is foggy during the summer, you may need to harvest the crop when mature and dry it indoors. Grain needs to be stored very dry, in order not to turn moldy.

Time of Planting: January - March just before rain is forecast. Plants need enough moisture for approximately 4 weeks for germination, and formation of a strong plant.

Ground preparation: Ground should be free of weeds and be raked to provide reasonably fine and even topsoil that can be furrowed 1-2 inches deep, with the tip or corner of a hoe. Furrows should be approximately 8 inches apart.

Rate of planting seeds: Drop seeds at 2-4 inch intervals into furrows and then cover using the edge of a hoe to bring furrow-ridge of soil over seeds. Approximately 2 ounces for 5' x 12' = 60 square feet plot.

Care of wheat plants: Cut invading weeds rather than pulling them, to avoid disturbing the wheat roots. Avoid irrigating wheat plants unless there is a severe drought. Stop any irrigation soon after heading and when the crop begins to dry down.

Green wheat grass harvesting: Cut wheat once, back to approximately 6 inches, no later than late March.

Grain harvesting time: The wheat is ready, from late June onwards, when there is no green left on the plant and the grain is almost too hard to bite. Ideally, grain moisture should be 10% or less and this is usually the case in the hottest regions of California; in general, the plant should be so dry it is totally brittle in the heat of the day. Harvest the wheat heads using a serrated sickle (wear protective gloves) and drop them into a large bag or bucket. Alternatively cut stems with sickle at approximately 6 inches from base and tie into neat sheaves or bundles (using a clove-hitch tie) so that the heads are lined up ready for the threshing.

Threshing wheat: Half fill a large tough cloth bag, with wheat heads and close it with a string tied in a clove hitch. Work the wheat heads contained in the bag underfoot on a clean grippy surface, e.g rubber mat. Wear clean rubber soled shoes and "scootch" the bag contents. This breaks up the heads and releases the grain from the husks (chaff). Take care to keep the grains whole, do not smash the grains! Similarly, if you have harvested sheaves, enclose the heads and top of sheaf in a large strong cloth bag and tie it closed, around the sheaf stem. Scootch the heads underfoot until all the chaff has been loosened and grain released.

Much of the chaff can be removed by swirling the mixture of grain and chaff in a large clean flat bottomed, round pan or dish bowl and then removing the chaff by the handful from the surface.

Winnowing: On a large clean sheet or tarp, arrange a fan on a table, and a grain catch bowl below on a chair. From above the fan's horizontal draught, pour the mixture of chaff and grain past the fan draught so that the grain falls into the bowl on the chair, and the chaff is carried away on the draft and falls on the tarp. Repeating this process will give you almost totally clean grain. By hand, pick out any remaining debris or foreign seed. This clean grain is now suitable for use as seed, or ready for you to cook as a dinner grain or mill to whole wheat flour. Store very dry, cool and in a well-closed container excluding insects and rodents.

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