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# How to Grow Sweet Corn: The Complete Guide



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# Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Sweet Corn

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)  
Last Updated: April 24, 2025




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How do we grow the sweet corn of our dreams—full, juicy, and oh-so-delicious? It’s disheartening when there are gaps left in our

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plant, grow, and harvest sweet corn in the garden.

## About Sweet Corn

Sweet corn is a tender, warm-season annual crop that produces ears of yellow, white, or bi-colored kernels. Native to the Americas, sweet corn has been cultivated for thousands of years; it's famous as one of the [Three Sisters](#)—corn, beans, and squash—grown by Native Americans.

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A long, frost-free growing season (60 to 100 frost-free days) is necessary to grow and harvest corn. Don't be tempted to sow too early, though. Mid to late spring is just fine once any chance of frosts is long gone.

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And corn is a grass! A member of the *Poaceae* family, corn relies on wind, not bees or insects, to pollinate its flowers. This is why we plant corn in blocks of short rows instead of long, single rows.

## Types of Sweet Corn

For a continuous supply of sweet corn, plant early, mid-season, and late varieties or plant every 2 or 3 weeks.

Have you ever had the intensely disappointing experience of tucking into a juicy-looking sweet corn cob only to find it tastes bland? This is the number one reason why paying a little bit more for your seeds really pays dividends. Hybrid or F1 varieties of sweet corn may cost a bit more, but they're worth every penny, yielding cobs with a superior flavor, especially if you pick one of the supersweet types. Varieties bred for sweetness hold their taste for longer too, but the sooner you cook them after picking, the better.

Learn more about the different varieties of

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## Read Next

- [A Cornucopia of Corn Facts](#)
- [A Cook's Garden: Corn, Okra, Shallots](#)
- [How to Grow Winter Squash Plants: The Complete Guide](#)

## PLANTING

The most common reasons for slow growth include poor light levels, not enough moisture, or a lack of nutrients. Plant in full sun (at least 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight). Soil needs to be consistently moist (though well-draining), as corn tends to suck up a lot of water. Corn is a hungry plant, so it's important to enrich beds with lots of organic matter, such as garden compost (ideally in the fall).

### When to Plant Corn

- Most gardeners sow corn directly in the garden soil (versus indoors) so that their sensitive roots aren't disturbed when transplanting.
- Corn is very sensitive to frost; do not plant soil temperature is at least 60°F (16°C), or 65°F (18°C) for super-sweet varieties. Usually, this is 2 or 3 weeks after the last frost in spring. See our [Planting Calendar](#) for corn based on average frost dates.
  - If you live in an area with a shorter growing season, choose an early variety that will mature well before the first fall frost. The ground can be warmed by a black plastic cover; sow seeds through holes in the plastic.
- A couple of weeks after planting your first round of corn, plant another round in order to extend the harvest.



- To speed germination, moisten seeds, wrap them in moist paper towels, and store them in a plastic bag for 24 hours.
- Because corn is wind-pollinated, it's essential to plant in a block, rather than a single row. For decent pollination, we recommend a modest block of, say, 10 to 50 plants. This maximizes the chances of the pollen released from the male tassels at the top of the plants drifting down into contact with the female silks lower down. Incomplete or inconsistent kernel development, with the cobs only partly or sporadically filled, is down to poor pollination. The silks protruding from the end of each cob are responsible for carrying the pollen down to the kernels. One strand connects to one kernel, so for complete fill, every strand of the silk must be pollinated.
- Sow seeds about 1½ to 2 inches deep and 12 inches apart in rows 2½ to 3 feet apart. Don't plant too close together or you run the risk of disappointingly small cobs.
- You may choose to fertilize at planting time with a general purpose (10-10-10 fertilizer); corn is meant to grow rapidly.
- Water well at planting time.

## Sowing Corn Indoors

If you're going to start seeds early, sow the seeds in pots under the protection of a greenhouse, hoop house, or cold frame. This means you can begin sowing three to four weeks before your last frost date, giving you a head start on corn sown outdoors—a huge advantage for areas with shorter growing seasons.

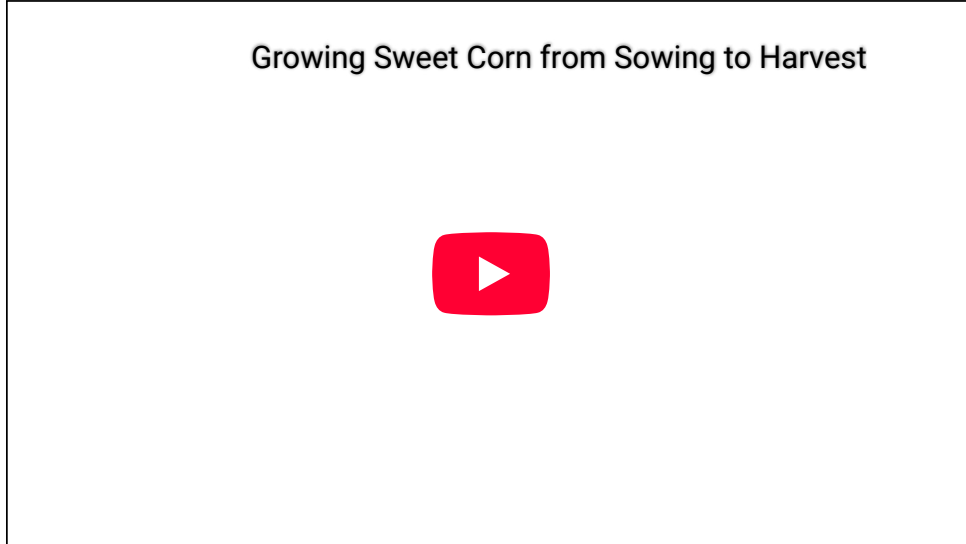
Sow eight to ten seeds half an inch deep into four-inch-wide pots, or sow two seeds per module in a plug tray and remove the weakest of the two seedlings when they emerge. Keep the potting soil moist as they grow on.

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Harden off the plants as your recommended planting time approaches by placing them outside for increasingly longer spells over the



Check out this video for great tips on growing juicy corn:



## GROWING

- Consistent moisture will encourage bigger, fatter ears of corn, so it's hard to over-emphasize the importance of this. Keep corn well watered, as it has shallow roots and can become stressed by drought. About 2 inches of water per week is sufficient; water more if conditions are especially hot or if your soil is sandy. If the soil remains dry, soak the soil again. When watering, aim at the base of plants to avoid problems with fungal diseases.
- Mulch helps to reduce evaporation around the plants.
- Corn's roots are shallow and can easily be

to get between the plants without damaging them. Then, apply several inches of mulch.

- Corn sometimes produces aerial roots a few inches above the soil. These are not meant to absorb water or nutrients but rather to stabilize the tall stalk. If this happens, mound soil up over the roots to keep them covered, or just cover the whole area with a mulch of compost, which will help feed the plants, too.
- Support stalks in windy places. Mounding the soil around the base of 12-inch-tall plants will help. If you do notice plants getting rocked about in the wind, consider tying them to stakes.
- Wind pollination is critical to developing full cobs of kernels. To help this along, gently shake the stalks of the plants every few days for as long as the tassels are viable to increase the chances of every silk being pollinated. Mornings are best.  
[Learn more about corn pollination, including how to hand-pollinate to guarantee pollination success.](#)
- Watch for signs of nitrogen deficiency (yellowing leaves) and respond with quick side-dressings of a nitrogen-rich fertilizer such as fish emulsion.

**Note:** Tillers, or “suckers,” are secondary shoots that may develop low on the stalk later in the season. They do not adversely affect the main stalk.

## Types

### Types of Sweet Corn

There are four main types of hybrid sweet corn: sugary (su), sugar-enhanced (se), shrunken (sh, sh<sup>2</sup>), and synergistic (sy). Each one contains a different level of sucrose, changing the flavor and texture of the corn. The type of corn will be listed right on the seed packet.

It's important to be aware of which type of corn you're growing—not only because of the sugar content, but also due to how easily the types can cross-pollinate. If the wrong combination of types cross-pollinates, the ears that are produced may be of subpar quality.

- **Sugary (su)** sweet corn is the classic sweet corn. Sugary varieties grow vigorously and are stress resistant. The kernels aren't too sweet and are said to have a “traditional” taste. However, the sugars in sugary sweet corn quickly turn to starch after the ears

after picking. Do not plant near shrunken or synergistic types.

- **Sugar-enhanced (se)** sweet corn is slightly sweeter than sugary varieties. They keep their sweetness for a longer period of time after harvest (a few days) than sugary varieties. They grow well with few issues. Do not plant near shrunken types.
- **Shrunken (sh, sh2)** sweet corn—also called “supersweet”—are the sweetest varieties, containing two to three times more sugar than sugary varieties. The sugar in their kernels lasts even longer after harvest (up to a week) than the other types, but kernels tend to be more crunchy and not taste as “corny.” Shrunken types are also more finicky overall. Do not plant them near any other types; hybrid kernels turn out starchy and tough.
- **Synergistic (sy)** sweet corn combines sugar-enhanced with one of the other two types to create varieties that have the best of both worlds. Synergistic types tend to have very sweet, tender kernels with a good taste and some synergistic varieties can keep up to a week after harvest. Do not plant near sugary or shrunken types.

Recommended varieties include:

- **‘Argent’**: sugar-enhanced variety, good taste. White kernels.
- **‘Iochief’**: midseason, normal-sugar variety. Yellow kernels.
- **‘Luther Hill’**: dwarf, normal-sugar variety. Produces 4- to 6-inch ears on 4- to 5-foot stalks. White kernels. Grow at least nine dwarf plants in a block of three or four rows.
- **‘Silver Queen’**: normal-sugar variety. Resistant to some bacterial diseases. White kernels.
- **‘Sweet Sunshine’**: supersweet variety. Disease resistant and high yield. Yellow kernels.

Corn can be a feast for the eyes, too! Look for these ornamental varieties:

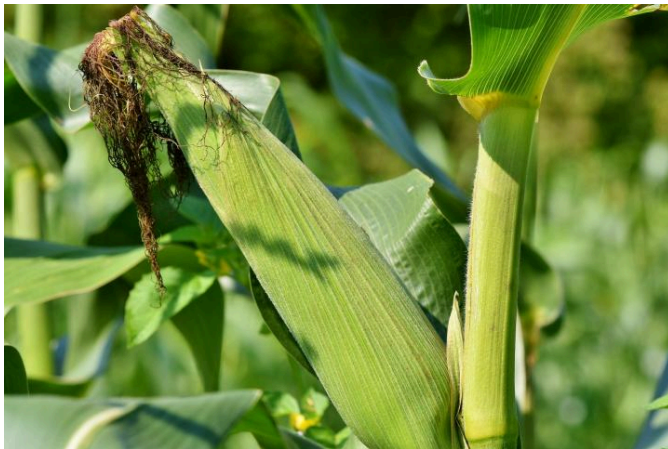
- **‘Glass Gem’**: Sporting multi-colored, semi-transparent kernels, this is a favorite for kids.
- **‘Painted Mountain’**: Looking for the classic “maize” colors? This variety has a great diversity of natural tones. [Check out our video to learn more about growing and using painted mountain corn.](#)



## HARVESTING

- The warmer the air, the more quickly corn matures. It is usually ripe about 15 to 23 days after silking and sooner if temperatures are exceptionally high.
- When two ears grow on a stalk, the upper ear matures 1 to 2 days before the lower one.
- At harvest, ears should be rounded or blunt, not pointed, with tassels turning brown and kernels full and milky.
  - To test, pull down some husk and pierce a kernel with a fingernail. If it's white, or milky, it's ready. The milk stage is brief; in hot weather (over 85°F/29°C), sweet corn is at peak for only 1 to 2 days, so check it frequently. Corn harvested a few days after milk stage will not be as sweet.

- Sweet corn varieties (except for super-sweet varieties) lose their sweetness soon after harvest. Immediately after picking, prepare the ears for eating or preservation.
- Prepare for eating or preserving immediately after picking. Enjoy your harvested corncobs as soon as you can. The quicker they're cooked, the sweeter they will be!
- If immature corn suffers a late-season frost, the plants and cobs can be damaged and result in the death of the plant or poor-tasting corn.



## How to Store Corn

- Sweet corn freezes well, especially if removed from ears before freezing. Learn how to [properly freeze corn](#).
- Corn can also be harvested for [other purposes](#)!





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PESTS/DISEASES

Corn Pests and Diseases

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
<a href="#">Anthracnose</a>	Fungus	Yellow/brown/purple/black spots on leaves; sunken, dark spots on stems; spots may develop a salmon-pink, gelatinous mass; eventually, rot; in corn, tops die back and stalks rot	Destroy infected plants; choose resistant varieties; provide good drainage; avoid overhead watering; apply compost; use mulch; rotate crops
Corn earworms	Insect	On corn, eaten silks and kernels; excrement; larvae also attack tomatoes and other plants, eating fruit/leaves/flowers	Remove caterpillars; apply vegetable oil to point where silks enter corn a week after



Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
			husks; grow an early variety; add native plants to invite beneficial insects; till soil in fall; spray Bt
<u>Cucumber beetles</u> (spotted)	Insect	Holes in leaves; plants stunted/die; larvae feed on roots; may spread bacterial wilt	Handpick; mulch heavily; use row covers; destroy plants infected with bacterial wilt
<u>Cutworms</u>	Insect	Wilting; severed stems of seedlings just above or below soil line; whole seedlings disappear	Handpick; in spring before planting, cultivate soil to reduce larvae; wrap a 4-inch-wide collar made from cardboard or newspaper around each stem, sinking 2 inches into soil; weed; use row covers; destroy crop residue
<u>Earwigs</u>	Insect	Many small holes in leaves/stems; corn silks eaten	Trap in tuna can filled with 1/2 inch of fish oil and sunk in soil such that edge is slightly above ground level; remove plant debris

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		ears	coyote urine spray, or blood meal around plants; enclose corn with fence (at least 8 feet tall)
<b>Downy mildew</b>	Fungus	Yellow, angular spots on upper leaf surfaces that turn brown; white/purple/gray cottony growth on leaf undersides only; distorted leaves or corn tassels; defoliation	Remove plant debris; choose resistant varieties; ensure good air circulation; avoid overhead watering
<u><a href="#">Flea beetles</a></u>	Insect	Numerous tiny holes in leaves, like birdshot from a shotgun	Use row covers; mulch heavily; add native plants to invite beneficial insects
<u><a href="#">Japanese beetles</a></u>	Insect	Leaves skeletonized (only veins remain); in corn, damage to husks/kernels/silk; grubs feed on roots	Handpick; use row covers; plant tansy near infested plants to lure beetles away
<u><a href="#">Raccoons</a></u>	Mammal	Broken stalks; half-eaten, missing ears	Scatter human-scented items, coyote urine spray, or blood meal around plants
<b>Wireworms</b>	Insect	Seeds hollowed;	Trap by digging 2-

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
			germinating beans/peas or potato sections as bait, cover with soil or a board, in 1 week uncover and kill collected wire- worms; sow seeds in warm soil for quick germination; provide good drainage; remove plant debris; rotate crops

## WIT AND WISDOM

- Baby corn is produced from regular corn plants that are harvested early, while the ears are immature. Regular sweet corn, sugar-enhanced sweet corn, and super-sweet corn varieties can be used, along with a few varieties that are specific for baby corn.
- A cornstalk grows slowly until it reaches about 24 inches; then it grows 3 to 4 inches per day in hot weather!
- Different traditions have arisen as to the best time to plant corn. Many lunar gardeners plant when the Moon is waxing to

it is said that corn planted under a waning Moon grows more slowly but yields bigger ears. [Learn more about gardening by the Moon!](#)

- *If your corn shucks harder than usual, prepare for a cold winter.*
- Corn is one of the [Three Sisters](#); its growing style pairs perfectly with [beans](#) and [squash](#). Learn more about [companion planting](#).
- Corn is great for eating but also has so many other uses including medicinal. [Learn more about corn for natural health.](#)
- Learn more fun, witty [facts about corn](#).

## RECIPES

**HARTWELL FARM CORN PUDDING**

**CORN CUSTARD**

**CORN AND BLACK BEAN PITAS**

**SUMMER CORN CAKES**

## COOKING NOTES

- If too much hot pepper or spice has been added to a soup or stew, adding a can of sweet corn can help.
- Popcorn is also a favorite snack if you have leftover kernels. Learn how to [make homemade popcorn here](#).

### VEGETABLES

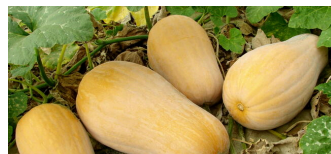
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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# COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

Liana (not verified)

9 months 1 week ago

My corn is about 6ft tall and just starting to develop tassels. This is my first time growing corn, and just realized my stalks don't have ears, as well as having some yellowing at the base. I looked it up and my best guess is a nutrition deficiency, so I've added some nitrogen and more calcium. My question is, at this point if the issue was nutrients, is there enough time for ears to develop before the tassels are no good? Should I wrap the tassels to preserve the male pollen for when there are ears?

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REPLY

The Editors

9 months 1 week ago

If you have tassels, it's not pollination.

And if your corn looks tall and green but lacks ears, it might be overcrowded, and your plantings are too thick. However, the yellowing that you mention, plus the lack of ears, does indeed suggest nitrogen deficiency. It's hard for us to diagnose from

there are mixed results on late-season nitrogen application for corn. If your corn already had a nice nitrogen application in fall/spring, and it's the weather called some leaching, it may work. If the corn lacked nitrogen all along, it probably wouldn't make up the yield. But you might as well try it. Here is a good reference from [the Purdue extension](#).

REPLY

---

**Dede Wilson (not verified)** 1 year 6 months ago

We are going corn crazy over here. We educate people about the low FODMAP diet, and there is a lot of confusion about what you can and cannot eat. Corn is so versatile, from fresh to all the various dried and ground versions, we absolutely love it. If anyone is suffering with irritable bowel syndrome and/or following the low FODMAP diet, and loves corn, check out our article, Is Corn Low FODMAP?, and let us know if you have any questions!  
<https://www.fodmapeveryday.com/is-cheese-low-fodmap/>



**Ello (not verified)** 1 year 8 months ago

I really appreciate this article on corn and have a question. This is our first year having grown popping corn which was going really great till some very adorable squirrels got into it and after trying a bunch of different ways to keep them out of the corn we finally decided to pull the fully ready ones (not dried) and are hoping it's possible to dry them inside but is it possible? The rest we left with cages over the ears of corn. Not mad at the squirrels bc it's just nature but hoping we will still be able to have something to show for it. Thank you in advance

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 1 year 8 months ago

Dear Ello,

Thank you for your note about your furry wild popcorn-loving neighbors. Yes, if the corn is ripe, you can dry the ears inside.

[Here is our guide to growing popcorn](#) including advice for harvesting and drying.

Good luck and happy popping!

—The Editors

[REPLY](#)

---

**Backyard Farme... (not verified)** 1 year 9 months ago

This is my first year growing corn in my backyard garden.

Trying to find out what to do after harvest has been quite difficult/information is unclear.

Do we leave the stalks in the ground for a while after harvest? Remove entirely/to a certain height?

Thanks,

Ontario, Canada ca

[REPLY](#)

**The Editors** 1 year 9 months ago

You will want to remove the stalks soon after harvest. There are a number of pests that will use what remains after harvest as a winter home and by removing the stalks you will greatly reduce their chances of survival. But you have a few

You can cut them down and put them in your compost pile. We suggest cutting them up some to increase the rate of decomposition. You will then want to till the stalk nubs back into the soil. You can also till all of it into the soil. There are a lot of great nutrients that remain in corn stalks and it will provide good organic matter for next year's plantings once it breaks down.

And if you want to think ahead, cut some of the stalks and dry them upside down and they will make for great decor when fall rolls around!

**REPLY**

---

**Louise McIntosh (not verified)** 1 year 11 months ago

Could you please post how you boil corn and how you barbeque it. How long should you boil it for or leave it on the barbeque. Thank you

**REPLY**

and then add in the ears of corn. Cook it for 5 minutes. When it comes to cooking corn on the cob on the grill there are several methods. Try this: peel the corn and remove the silk. Pull the husks back up and then soak the ears in salted water for about 10 minutes. Remove and make sure to shake off any excess water. Place the ears on the grill, close the lid, and turn every 6 minutes. Your corn should be ready after 20 minutes.

**REPLY**

---

**Stephen Stewart (not verified)** 2 years 8 months ago

All in the article is well and good...BUT what about the GMO corn that does not have a natural taste ?? The artificial over sweeter sugar taste that makes some of us nauseated after 2 bites as opposed to heirloom corn. All of the corn at the supermarket and many farm produce stands is GMO corn and the GMO corn is unnatural and has a strange taste

**REPLY**

**MORE COMMENTS**

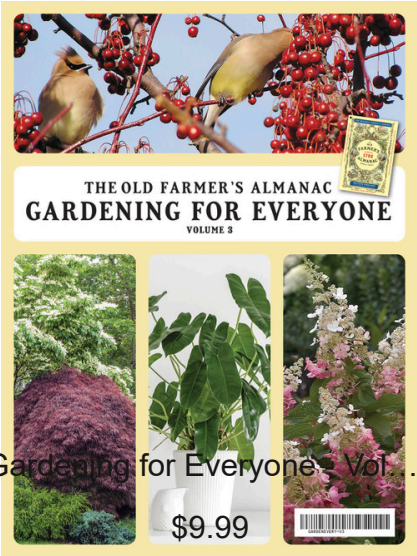
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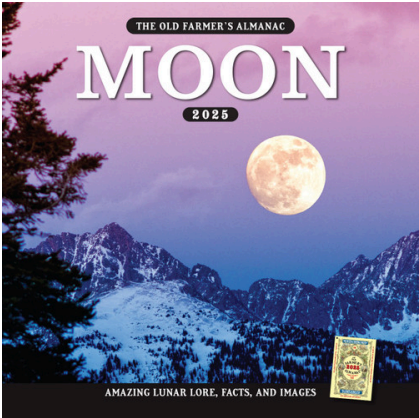
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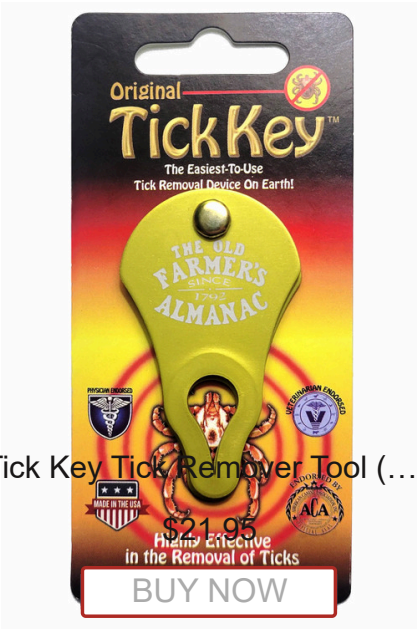
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