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Tassel-Ears in Corn

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Seems like every year about this time someone walks into the Chat 'n Chew Cafe carrying an odd-looking tassel that is part tassel and part ear to show off to the guys over at the corner table. Much discussion always ensues over the causes of tassel-ears, but the usual consensus is that it falls into the general category of corny oddities and is rarely a yield-influencing factor.



A corn plant exhibits both male flowers and female flowers (a flowering habit called "monoecious" for you trivia fans.) Interestingly, both flowers are initially bisexual (aka "perfect"), but during the course of development the female components (gynoecia) of the male flowers and the male components (stamens) of the female flowers abort, resulting in tassel (male) and ear (female) development. Once in a while, the upper flower that typically becomes a tassel instead forms a combination of male and female floral parts on the same reproductive structure. This "tassel-ear" is an odd-looking affair and is found most commonly on tillers or "suckers" of a corn plant along the edges of a field. Without a protective husk covering, the kernels that develop on tassel-ears are at the mercy of weathering and exposed to hungry birds. Consequently, harvestable good quality grain from tassel-ears is a rarity.

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Tassel-ear on a tiller.



Closer view of tassel-ear, depicting the male and female floral parts.



A decrepit tassel-ear closer to harvest time.



Closer view of decrepit tassel-ear, depicting the male and female floral parts.



A normal ear on the main stalk and a tassel-ear on the tiller of a single plant.

Related References

Nielsen, R.L. (Bob). 2003. **Tillers or “Suckers” in Corn: Good or Bad?** Corny News Network, Purdue Univ. Online at <http://www.kingcorn.org/news/articles.03/Tillers-0623.html>. (URL verified 7/13/04)

Nielsen, R.L. (Bob). 2004. **Grain Fill Stages in Corn.** Corny News Network, Purdue Univ. Online at <http://www.kingcorn.org/news/articles.04/GrainFill-0705.html>. (URL verified 7/13/04)

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For other information about corn, take a look at the Corn Growers' Guidebook at <http://www.kingcorn.org>.

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