

Corn Stars
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Very few species in the vegetable industry display the rapid changes and advances that are seen in sweet corn. Corn genetics are relatively well understood by the breeders (scientists). There are billions, if not trillions of possible gene combinations.

Corn is highly hybridized. Each year, breeders work with hundreds of new inbred (parent lines), and cross them with other parent varieties that have known, desirable traits (Test lines). The outcome is tens of thousands of new hybrids. Often, these new hybrids are trialed in research plots. Numerous notes are taken in an effort to understand what specific traits each parent line contributes to their offspring. In the final stages of the development of hybrids, a breeder, assistant breeder, skilled technician or perhaps a salesman walks the plots. Varieties are scored on several dozen traits. A small percent of them show commercial potential and are advanced into naming and production.

A variety that shows “star” potential in a test plot still has a lengthy process to complete before it is a “Superstar,” in the marketing world. It is necessary to know if the variety will produce ample yields of strong seed. Will the Hybrid be adaptable across a broad enough geographic range to make it worthy of production? Does the variety fit a necessary niche in the market with the required appearance, color, flavor and maturity?

Today’s markets are highly fragmented. Varieties can be classed by color (bicolor, white, or yellow), maturity (generally early, mid or late), and isolation group (the su group, including se’s, and also the sh2 group). Today, there are also many subcategories of the aforementioned gene types, such as synergistic and augmented.

Less than a generation ago, a “superstar” variety like “Silver Queen,” sold upwards of 2 million pounds of seed per year. Today, partly due to market fragmentation, a very successful fresh market variety would have sales of 100,000 pounds annually. In today’s fresh market category, few varieties actually reach the 100,000 lb mark. To be a commercially viable variety, most production companies would target a minimum of 10,000 lbs of seed sales. This means that there are many more varieties filling the market niches, and it appears that the varieties often have a shorter market lifespan.

Breeding, trialing and marketing has become increasingly competitive. And just because many of the new varieties don’t sell a million plus pounds, doesn’t mean that they are not improvements. Many of us would have a hard time choking down a “superstar” variety of bygone days.

So, what varieties may rocket to the top of our favorite lists, over the next year?

Stellar is new in the 76 day slot. It is a bicolor, high quality, augmented sh2. Stellar is marketed by Stokes, Seedway and Sieggers. It is an augmented sh2, with excellent productivity. It was a real standout in several of the trials this summer, and seems to be working as far south as Georgia. In one trial, Stellar had long shanks, and it always seems to make a large package. Large packages are a concern for some growers, and other growers view them as a benefit. The husk is beautifully dark.

7143 is a new release from Seminis. It is very similar to Obsession, but has an improved rust package. There may also be some other slight changes, but overall, it appears to be an improved Obsession. Depending on supply, you should be able to purchase 7143 from any dealer that markets Obsession or other Seminis products. Like Obsession, 7143 appears to be a real workhorse!

Awesome is a relatively new release from IFSI. It is available from both Stokes and Seedway. Its release number was 2574. Awesome's maturity is between Fantastic (73 day) and Triumph (77 day), so about 74 or 75 days. Awesome is less likely to lodge than Fantastic, and has better cover than Triumph. It is also more of a shipper style.

Sweet Surprise is also a release from IFSI. It is marketed exclusively through Rispen Seeds, Inc., out of Illinois. It has excellent husk color and flags, along with a short shank. The kernel appearance is very good. Its tenderness is average, but its sweetness was very good. Sweet Surprise has been commercially planted and the feedback from growers is excellent

XTH 2170 is a 73 day bicolor from IFSI. It falls into the 73 day range, along with Fantastic, XTH 2573 and XTH 2673. XTH 2170 has excellent refinement, quality and large ears.

Although it isn't bird proof, it appears to resist bird damage better than many varieties, and growers are often slotting it into their second early plantings. Its 8" ears are fitting into both the roadside and shipper markets, making it one of Siegers Seeds, and Harris Seeds, top selling varieties in the NE.

Mirai 310 is new and will be tested in strips for 2010. Mirai 310 is in the 75/76 day range. It had good vigor in our early tests. The ears were 7.5" with perfect fill. Sweetness, tenderness and the overall ear rated a 4/4, making it one of the highest quality varieties tested.

Additionally, it had a dark, attractive husk. It should be commercial in 2011.

Garrison is a new yellow, sh2 workhorse from Syngenta (Rogers Brand). Its vigor rated a perfect 4/4. Garrison has a great package, and plant, and is very productive. It has been used from Florida, through the Northeast. Garrison has a high level of disease tolerance, and is used extensively in the shipper's market.

BSS 0982 is an 82 day, sh2, Attribute variety. It has become very popular and is really the first high quality sh2, bicolor, with BT traits. BSS 0982 has been available for about 2 years.

Additionally, in the sh2 category, you can expect to see many of your favorite varieties, such as "Fantastic" and "Triumph" being re-released with improved rust tolerance to the new races of rust.

BC 0805, is not new. It's been available for about 10 years or more, but it deserves "superstar" recognition. BC 0805 is a high quality se, in about the 84 day maturity very similar to Providence but with BT traits. It's sold by a variety of dealers, that handle Syngenta (Rogers Brand), and is a top seller with many dealers.

New corn releases seem to be occurring more often in the supersweet isolation group, than the se group. There are many strong players in the mid-season (73 to 78 day) class. The industry is still struggling to find outstanding "first early" and "late" varieties.