

The fruit of this plant is especially for kids. It grows like other fruits of its kind.

The pollen grows on tassels. When the pollen is ripe, little anthers, or pollen bags, hang out of the tassels. The wind shakes the anthers, and about ten million pollen grains fall out. All those grains blow in the wind to fertilize other plants of its kind.

The part of the plant which will become the fruit is well-protected. Many little ovaries of the fruits-to-be sit like little pearls on a thick central stalk. Leaves are wrapped tightly around the whole stalk to keep insects out and protect it from the weather.

Because the little ovaries are wrapped up so tightly, they must have a special way to collect the pollen. Pollen would do no good resting on the protective leaves. So each ovary has a tiny, silky thread which grows from it and reaches out beyond with fine hairs to catch pollen.

As each grain of pollen lands on the hairs, it grows a tube through the thread to the protected ovary. Within each ovary is an ovule, or a seed-to-be. When the pollen reaches the ovule, a seed is formed. The ovary around it begins to grow and forms a fruit. Hundreds of tiny fruits grow on each protected stalk. The fruits become big and juicy within their protective leaves.

At this stage, adults often pick the fruits from the big plant and eat them, but they're not ready for kids yet.

If the fruits stay on the plant until the end of the growing season they become very hard and dry. Each little fruit looks like the seed that was first planted. In fact, you can plant each dried fruit for a new crop. Or you can take the stalks of dried fruit inside and dry them more. When they're completely dried they look like hard little kernels; but packed inside each one is a surprise, especially for kids.

Put the hard little kernels in a pan and heat them. When they reach a certain temperature, the moisture inside of them changes to steam. The steam can't escape because the kernels have such hard covers. Finally the pressure inside becomes too great, and the kernel explodes and it tastes good also.

Now, if you got this far and can't see how many different school topics are included in this one example of how agriculture can be dramatic, fun and tasty all at the same time you really need to have us come to your classroom. You can also get more facts on popcorn for free at www.popcorn.org or look up Popcorn and Maize at www.lifelab.org.