

Dear Aggie: How do farmers design and grow those giant corn mazes every fall?

Corn mazes are one way that farmers celebrate the harvest season in a fun and creative way. To create these corn mazes farmers combine traditional agriculture, community fun, and a touch of creativity and artistic design. Let's talk about how these farmers plan, plant, and prepare these fun living puzzles.

Most corn mazes begin months before the farmer even takes a step onto the field. In early spring, farmers start by selecting the right type of corn. Typically, farmers select a forage or silage corn variety, which grow tall, dense, and durable-perfect for forming solid "walls" that hold up through the fall weather and heavy foot traffic. The farmer also will select a field that drains well and gets plenty of sunlight to make sure the crop grows healthy and even.

Once the field and corn species are chosen, the real maze design begins. To create these detailed maze layouts, farmers will often use computer software or even GPS technology. Some maze designs are winding paths, while others may be more elaborate and portray a picture or words that would be visible from the sky. Some farmers have used their farm logo as a design or a pumpkin. Using specialized software, farmers can upload a design and overlay it onto a digital map of their field. This would ensure that when it is time to plant their corn, the paths and patterns will be perfectly positioned.

When planting season begins, there are a few different options farmers use to create their corn mazes for the community to enjoy. Some farmers will plant their corn as usual and then later go back into the field and cut the maze paths themselves while the plants are still short and small. Other farmers use a term called "skip planting" where they will follow the design of the maze and they will adjust the planter on their tractor, then skip a row, ultimately creating a path within the maze. Some farmers who use GPS guided tractors will utilize a software designed pattern that has been put into their GPS and precisely follow the design coordinates. The timing is critical because if the corn grows too tall before cutting, it can be much harder to form clear and walkable trails.

After the maze has been planted and shaped, the farmer must focus on maintenance of the paths. They will mow and till the walking paths throughout the summer to keep them clear, while also taking care of the rest of the corn to keep it healthy and growing strong. Farmers will also go through the maze and place educational stations, scavenger hunts, or signs throughout the maze to teach visitors about corn production, soil health, and local agriculture.

Next time you are winding through these towering stalks, remember that behind every twist and turn is a farmer using both old fashioned know-how and cutting-edge tools to bring a field of corn to life in a whole new way.

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