

Detasseling: The Who, What, Why & How

Who: If you grew up in any state that deals in corn, (like Nebraska) then you've probably heard of detasseling. Each year during the summer months, thousands of students, typically under the age of 18, head out to the cornfields and remove the tassel at the top of the corn plant.

What: Detasseling involves removing the top of the corn plant (the tassel) which contains pollen that allows the corn plant to reproduce. This simple act prevents unwanted pollination, resulting in the plant producing pure hybrid seeds.

Why: As mentioned before, detasseling prevents unwanted pollination and allows the plant to produce pure hybrid seeds. These seeds are what begin the planting season in the spring and it's because of the previous years' hard work of generating these hybrid seeds that allows for a better crop yield. These seeds are typically more drought tolerant and disease resistant because of effective cross breeding.

Each corn plant has a male and female flower. The tassel is the male flower and sits at the top of the stalk while an ear of corn with silk is the female flower. The pollen from the tassel is shook loose by wind and travels down the silk to pollinate and develop an into a seed. Left on its own, corn will pollinate itself, but to generate better types of corn detasseling allows for cross-pollination and different strains of corn to be mixed.

How: Detasseling is done in two steps: machine and manual. First is detasseling by machine where the 'cutter' goes through the rows of corn and cuts off the tops. This makes the stalks more uniform for the 'puller' machine to come through and pull the tassel out of the plant.

However, this is not 100% effective as cornstalks are not all the same height. Either with or without machine detasseling, human hands are needed to finish the process. Detassellers walk through the corn rows and pluck the tassels by hand. Sometimes workers walk the fields two or three times to catch all the tassels that might have been missed by the machine.

