

## **If You Don't Know Beans...**

Funny about the word “bean”. It may refer to your noggin/head or become a verb if said head is assaulted by a ball. On the other hand if you are without a bean, you are flat broke. In a gardening context bean is an edible seed, grown worldwide and a stalwart addition to a healthy diet.

Combined with rice, beans offer a complete protein at low cost. That is not merely a budget plus but an environmental plus. Raising beef for protein has great environmental, energy, and pollution costs, so should become a special treat, not a daily habit.

Beans grow well in our Tidewater climate and probably the most popular are those grown for the pod and not merely the beans. For beans in general, their culture requires a sunny location (6 to 8 hours), soil that is well-drained, preferably a deep sandy loam of moderate fertility. The most favorable pH is 5.8 to 7.0 so check your soil before adding lime. They love heat, 65 to 80F with the exception of fava beans that grow best in cool temperatures between 60 and 65F.

When purchasing seeds for growing beans you may notice that some of them have been inoculated with nitrogen-fixing bacteria to increase the yield if they are grown in a new plot. Beans are legumes, which means they fix nitrogen in the soil as soon as the roots are established. Be careful to avoid adding nitrogen fertilizer when planting them as too much nitrogen will delay flowering. They can be side-dressed once they are flowering heavily and setting pods, using three tablespoons of 10-10-10 per ten-foot row.

Seeds can go into the ground once the soil is warm, 65 to 85 degrees: cold soil encourages rotting. In planning the garden if you are growing pole beans, don't put the trellis where the lush growth will shade other plants. If possible plant the row on an east-west line. Incidentally if you have leftover seeds, they are viable for three years, so plant away!

Bush beans can be planted successively two or three weeks apart until August 1, since, unlike pole beans, they don't keep producing even if kept picked. Half-runner types, a mix of bush and pole types, can be allowed to roam about or trellised to increase yield.

When searching catalogs for something new in the bean department [www.territorialseed.com](http://www.territorialseed.com) is informative. They offer facts to help you choose the best bean for your garden conditions and culinary purposes as well as netting and inoculants if you are growing quantities.

Edamame, *Glycine max*, is a soybean that has moved from field to home garden and eaten as a snack. Edamame is sweeter and more digestible than other soybeans and can be used in recipes calling for peas or lima beans. They require the same culture as bush beans but have a short harvesting period and should be picked as soon as the beans fill the pod and before the pod yellows.

Another bean that would be fun to grow is the 'Red Noodle', a spectacular yard-long garden bean. Actually, this heat-tolerant and robust bean is a slender 18 inches, garnet colored, sweet and stringless and can be steamed, stir-fried, or eaten in soup. The Territorial catalog features runner beans so lovely they may be used in shadier places as a landscape plant. Their pods should be picked as soon as the beans are beginning to form in the pod.

The February/March issue of Organic Gardening has a feature on beans as inexpensive, easy to grow nutrition which points out that by flowering during the hottest part of the summer when a lot of plants are 'resting' bean blooms attract pollinators and other beneficial insects to your garden. As a benefit our warm summer nights allow us to grow the lima bean, a jewel in Southern succotash. Ancient Andean farmers perfected this bean in Peru where it was a food reserved for Inca nobility.

The heirloom varieties that are found in most catalogs are wonderful for eating, freezing, drying, or canning with distinctive tastes and other features. Once you find a non-hybrid heritage bean your family loves you can save the seeds as they are self-pollinating so rarely cross pollinate.

To harvest beans for drying leave them on the vine until the pods are dry and brittle. (If the weather is wet pull up the plant and hang it in the garage.) Spread them on newspapers in a single layer for a week or so in a cool place. Shell, sort and toss any shriveled ones. Pack them in airtight containers for the pantry or they can be frozen for as long as ten years. (why?)