

HOME & GARDEN

Beans play a major role around the globe

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Recorder Columnist

Beans are one of the oldest foods cultivated by man. They have been grown in the Americas, in Europe and Asia and almost every culture has its own favorite beans that play a major and basic role in its cuisine. Beans can be a staple providing good nutrition at low cost, or they can be a delicacy, fancy enough for a rich man's table.

Here in the United States there are over 4,000 strains of the genera *Phaseolus* which includes the species runner beans, lima beans and kidney beans. Green beans are a staple in the frozen food cabinets, three bean salad is a favorite at deli counters and there was a time at my house when Saturday night was not complete without a big pot of baked beans served warm and spicy from the oven with corn bread and maybe some slices of ham. Beans are obviously versatile and there are beans and bean dishes to appeal to everyone.

The bean has proved itself adaptable and any number of varieties can be grown here in Massachusetts. They are not difficult to grow and require very little fussing.

They do like a soil that is only slightly acid. They will grow if the pH is 5.5, but they will thrive if the pH is between 6 and 7. If your pH is low, make sure that liming is a part of your cultural program. Lime is ordinarily applied and worked into the soil in the fall, but if you realize that your soil is still too acid in the spring when you are planting, it is possible to add more lime at that time. It will not act fast, but it will be some help to the beans.

Secondly, beans like a soil that is rich in humus. I've said it before and I will probably say it again — feed the soil and not the plant. Don't worry about adding the proper amount of chemical fertilizers, but do worry about feeding the soil manure, stable bedding, chicken house cleanings, old mulch, compost, and cover crops that have been grown especially to control weeds and to add nutrients and more organic matter to the soil when they are turned under in the spring.

All this organic matter will create a soil that is rich in humus. Clay soils will be improved so that the particles of soil do not stick together preventing water from penetrating, as well as plant roots. Sandy soils will also be improved. The humus will hold the soil particles together and help it to



retain water and the nutrients that otherwise leach away so quickly.

Beans grow in three distinctly different ways. There are bush beans which have a low and compact growth habit, there are twining types that sprawl and there are pole types that will climb when given supports. How you plant your beans will depend on what varieties you prefer.

John Withee, bean expert and author of *Growing and Cooking Beans*, recommends that bush beans be planted 2 or 3 inches apart in rows that are a foot apart for greatest productivity. I like to plant bean beds that are about 3 feet or three plants wide.

If you plant twining types like navy beans, you will want to space the seeds farther apart to allow for all their sprawl and toward the end support them on brush so that the ripening pods are not lying directly on the wet ground.

I am fascinated by all the different types of supports that people use for pole beans. I plant my pole beans around a three pole teepee with three or four seeds at the base of each pole. On my way to Greenfield everyday I pass a beautiful garden in Charlemont that has the most efficient supports I've ever seen made out of lumber and string. It looks like the

framing for a large oblong box with strings going from the top to the bottom that will soon have the beans happily climbing. People who have neither the time nor the inclination to make their own supports can now buy bean towers from garden supply centers and seed houses.

Whether you plant bush or twining or pole beans, your seeds should be planted 1 or 2 inches deep depending on the size of the seed.

Just be sure that seed is not planted too early in the season. Last year I lost half of my first planting because of rot when the weather turned so cold and wet early in June. This spring has been quite warm on our hill and the beans are up. We have just arranged a watering system using an old well in the pasture and now that I am able to water the garden I know the beans will really take off. Beans are a good crop to plant in July when some of the early crops are harvested and there may be some extra room in the garden. Some varieties are mature in only 54 days.

Growing beans is not that difficult and even though they are so common I find I have a lot to learn. Naturally I am familiar with string and wax beans and I often use Jacob's Cattle beans in the chili, black beans in the soup and pea beans on Saturday night, but I have never eaten shell beans. However, this year I have planted French horticultural beans and flageolet beans, both of which are picked when the beans have swollen to full size and when the pod is no longer tender and edible. My cookbook says these beans, shelled, can be simmered for a few minutes, perhaps with some summery savory, and served with butter as a side dish like any other vegetable. I am looking forward to this "new" dish on my table.

Next year I plan to try the purple podded bean. This may look rather unusual on the vine, but when it is blanched, briefly cooked in boiling water, it turns green. This is a great boon when it is time to do the freezing. I usually stir the blanching beans while my eyes are glued to a stop watch waiting for the water to come back to the boil. I want the beans cooked as briefly as possible, but long enough to stop the enzyme action that can cause spoilage. The purple podded bean has its own signal — its done when it is green.

I recommend *Growing and Cooking Beans* by Withee. He lists over 200 kinds of beans that are available commercially, explains how to grow and harvest beans and he gives dozens of ways to eat beans, in dips, soups, salads and casseroles.

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