

The Legumes: A source of colour in the potager and year-round protein in the kitchen



Legumes are a staple source of protein for many people and each different country and culture has their own varieties and recipes to make the most of this valuable food all year round. In the UK one of the most widely grown beans is the kidney bean, otherwise known as a runner bean. It is well adapted to the British climate and are delicious when picked young and cooked just perfectly but soon grow stringy and tough and even half a dozen plants can produce more beans than you know what to do with!

Why not try something different? There are many other climbing and dwarf beans to choose from and growing a selection can give you more culinary options. Here in mid France the climate lends itself to growing a variety of legumes for eating fresh in their pods, for shelling and for drying. They are easy to grow organically, and beginners can achieve good results as they do not have any special requirements and suffer from few pests and diseases.

Broad beans give you the first bean crop of the year and can be sown in the autumn in mild areas giving an even earlier crop. Choose one of the 'long pod' varieties such as 'Imperial Green Longpod' for smaller, tender beans. The white seeded varieties such as 'Aquadulce' tend to produce fewer, larger beans that rapidly develop a tough seed coat. Although broad beans can be eaten very young in the pod, it is more usual to shell them when the beans reach around 1 to 1.5cm in length. Pick them frequently for young, sweet, tender beans that can be lightly steamed. When the seeds get tough, boil them for longer and remove the seedcoat to make broad bean hummus. They do not climb and therefore do not require a frame to twine around but benefit from being planted in a block with some canes and string as a fence around them as they tend to flop.

There are a wide variety of climbing types; pencil pod varieties are best for eating the young beans whole in the pod, for a colourful dish choose a variety such as 'Blue Coco', a heritage variety which produces purple podded beans. 'Coco' varieties produce short more rounded seeds in different colours while the haricot varieties produce longer bean seeds in slender pods. Coco varieties are dual purpose and can be eaten fresh in the pods when young or left

until the seeds are fully developed and dried for winter use. The 'Haricot Blanc' or cannellini types are also good for shelling and drying and can be cooked later to make haricot bean mash.

Dwarf French beans are similar, usually producing stringless slim pods but the beans tend to hang down low on the plant, touching the soil and if you have problems with slugs and snails then the climbing varieties are better.



Figure 1 Purple Lab Lab Beans

Borlotti types are flat podded and produce larger, meatier beans for shelling and eating fresh (rather like peas) or they can be dried for use in winter casseroles, or for making your own 'baked beans'. The purple/pink mottled pods are attractive on the plant and they have few pest problems.

Lab lab beans need a warm season to produce a decent crop but are attractive plants with deep purple leaves, pink/purple flowers and broad purple or green pods, they are picked young and eaten raw in salads or sliced into a stir fry or curry.

You can also try growing your own soya beans, black eye beans and chick peas. They do need a good long, warm season to get a decent crop but are great fun to grow!

Peas and Beans are happy on most soils as they generate their own nitrogen. You can start them off early by sowing in pots in a greenhouse or polytunnel in early to mid April to get a longer growing season. Sow them individually into 9cm pots in a good seed compost, bury them twice the depth of their diameter. Keep frost free and damp, they should germinate within a couple of weeks. Plan them out when they have about 6 healthy leaves. They need about 30cm between each plant. (Broad beans can be sown in from mid March by the same method)

You can sow them direct in the ground in late May – sow two seeds per station in case one fails to germinate, remove the weakest seedling if both germinate. (Broad beans can be sown direct in October or April)

All of the climbing varieties of bean will require support while growing, you can make a wigwam or 'tent' structure (double row of canes that meet in the middle with a supporting ridge pole) out of bamboo canes, or if you have plenty of birch or hazel handy you can make your climbing frame out of young branches. Peas need a climbing frame typically made from 'pea' sticks – twiggy hazel or birch branches about a metre long pushed into the ground in a double row.

Water them in well for the first couple of weeks until they are established. They need a good supply of water while the pods are forming so prepare the soil well before planting by digging in organic matter at the root zone and/or mulching the surface after planting to conserve moisture with homemade garden compost, leaf mold or other composted green waste material. This will reduce the need for irrigation as it will conserve the natural soil moisture as well as improving soil structure and nutrients.

Harvest your beans daily as soon as the pods are 10-15cm long for varieties that you cook in the pod – the very young ones can also be eaten raw in salads and used for dipping. Varieties that are grown for shelling such as broad beans and borlotti beans can be left until the swollen beans are visible bumps along the length of the pod.

Beans do not suffer from too many pests and diseases, pea and bean weevil take notches out of the young leaves but does little real harm, broad beans tend to attract black fly on the growing tips, simply pinch out the soft tops and dispose of them – this also helps to promote fruit set. Chocolate spot can be more damaging, which is a fungal disease, symptoms include a brown powdery coating on the leaves and pods, in bad cases the leaves turn brown and productivity drops. To avoid using fungicides good hygiene, crop rotation and growing stout healthy plants can help to prevent this.