

Growing Dried Beans in a Home Garden

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Colorful, nutritious, and easy to grow

When you remember sayings about beans, you might believe that beans had no value whatsoever. Remember, “It doesn’t amount to a hill of beans,” or, “She doesn’t know beans about it”? There is also a derisive early slam on people of Tuscany by their Northern Italian neighbors calling them “mangiafagioli” or “bean-eaters.” Let’s admit it. Most all of us are “mangiafagioli” to one extent or another because we do recognize the value of beans.

Dry beans are easily grown in the home garden and supply a good source of protein (about 22%); they are rich in fiber, minerals zinc and iron, and B vitamins such as folic acid. Including them in our diet can help lower cholesterol and prevent heart disease.

Botanically labeled *Phaseolus vulgaris*, dried beans (also called shell beans) are the same genus and species as green beans or snap beans. Although dry beans grow like green beans, green beans are selected to have stringless pods, while dried bean pods are very fibrous and not good eating. Green beans can be saved and eaten as a dry bean but they don’t store as well, often have poor texture and flavor, and the seed cost is generally higher.

Which of the hundreds of varieties of seeds to choose? You will want to find varieties that mature in under 95-100 days. Dried beans come in both bush and pole varieties. Pole beans are grown on a trellis, take up less space than bush beans, keep producing for a long time, and are easy to pick. Bush beans are earlier, which work well in our Pacific Northwest gardens with the short growing season and cool summers. There are also many more varieties of bush beans available in a wide selection of patterns and colors.

Look to the Washington State University horticulture website at <http://vegetables.wsu.edu/NicheMarket/BeanVarieties.html> for the best dried beans to grow in our state. The site includes many bean photos, information on days to maturity, plant heights, bean characteristics and growing information. Check seed catalogs that specialize in dry bean varieties grown in a zone similar to our own.

After choosing your bean variety, test your soil’s nutritive levels and balance them according to your test results. Plant seeds in fertile, well-drained soil that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight each day. There is no need to soak seeds, but if you choose to, submerge in room temperature water for less than 12 hours. Inoculate seed with *Rhizobium leguminosararum*, a bacterium that occurs naturally in the soil but is not everywhere. This bacterium will ensure that the beans are able to fix nitrogen from the air around the roots. Then it is not necessary to apply

large amounts of nitrogen to the soil during the growing season. Obtain this special inoculate for beans from your local farm store, specialty nursery or from seed catalogs that offer a large selection of dry bean varieties. Purchase seeds that are less than three years old.



A number of varieties of beans can grow effectively in a home garden. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Begin sowing about May 15, and try to be done by June 1. Soil temperatures should optimally be 60 degrees to get a good start. Don't plant if air temperatures are less than 50 degrees. If you plant any time later in the Pacific Northwest, you risk the autumn rains arriving and turning beans to mold before you can harvest them. Space seeds 2-3 inches apart in rows spaced 2-3 feet apart. Bean seeds are self-pollinating so different cultivars can be grown side by side without danger of cross-pollination.

Seeds need to be watered by you or Mother Nature with 1" of water each week, applied at their base, from the time they are seedling size until pods have turned yellow, usually mid- to late-August. Proper watering is especially needed during flowering to ensure good pod formation. Water in the mornings and avoid getting water on their leaves to deter foliage disease. Stop watering once the pods have turned yellow to allow them to dry out.

Weed thoroughly between rows to promote air flow between plants. Once established, beans can be mulched to keep weeds out and moisture in the soil.

Harvest beans once pods turn brown and leathery before they split open. Plants can be pulled entirely, or individual pods can be picked. Shell by hand or thresh the whole plant by stomping. Place beans in a sunny area or dry sheltered area to dry completely. Compost the plant residue into the soil at the end of the season to provide nitrogen for next year's crop.

Make sure your beans are completely dried with less than 15% moisture before storing or they will mold. If necessary, use a dehydrator set at 90 degrees F for 24 hours before storing. Place in well labeled jars, tins, plastic storage boxes or other containers with tight fitting lids and store in a dark, dry place. Dry beans can be stored for several years but after three or more years, they may develop "hard seed" and won't be able to absorb water in cooking or for germination.

For a list and pictures of common diseases and insect problems and common corrections, consult WSU Extension Fact Sheet FS135E: "Growing Dry Beans in the Home Garden."

Dry beans are a colorful, nutritious, easy-to-grow addition to any garden. The more you eat, the better you feel, so eat your beans at any meal!



Left: Scarlett Runner beans are one of many kinds of beans that grow well in a home garden. **Right:** Heritage beans are not only delicious, they are nutritious. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

- "Vegetables: Growing Dry Beans in the Home Garden." Carol Miles and Kelly Ann Atterberry. Washington State University. Extension Fact Sheet FS135E, April 2014.
- "Growing Dry Beans and Grains." Krista Rome. *Grow Northwest Magazine*. April 3, 2013.
- "Why I am Growing Beans?" Margaret Roach interviews Sarah Kleeger of "Adaptive Seeds, A Way to Garden podcast." April 11, 2016.
- "The Year of the Pulses (Dry Beans)." Marianne C. Ophardt, WSU Extension faculty. WSU Extension Garden Tips. Written for the *Tri-City Herald*, Kennewick, WA. January 31, 2016.
- "Growing Dry Beans: A Vermont Tradition." Winston A Way. University of Vermont Extension Agronomist.