



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

Eat Well with Beans and Peas in Your Garden

Bob Randall

Vegetables in the legume family Fabaceae are some of the most nutritious foods we can grow. When complimented with grains or other proteins, they are high in protein, and very high in fiber while low in calories. When fresh, they are fairly high in Vitamin C. The leaves of snow pea shoots are also very high in folic acid. Legumes also require less fertility investments or care than many other crops. So they are an important component of a local vegetable oriented diet.

This spring and summer, you can take some very simple steps to have a wide and varied legume menu. Vegetable gardeners (and gourmet cooks) have many types of snap beans, edible soy Edamame beans, and lima beans (butter peas) to look forward to. As well, we can grow long beans (asparagus beans), peanuts, and Southern peas (cowpeas). Southern peas include regional specialties like: cream peas and purple hulls, as well as the nationally marketed black-eyed peas.

As with all vegetables, success with warm weather legumes depends on good vegetable gardening techniques. You need a garden that is mostly sunny, with 8" raised beds of sandy loam soil, high quality mulch on the surface, a quality balanced organic fertilizer worked into the top inch at a rate of ¼ to one cup per square foot, and a non-toxic frame around the raised beds to prevent displacement of soil. One terrific source for soil & mulch supplies is Nature's Way Resources.

By careful planning, you can have considerable legume varieties. Start with a bed at least 24 ft. by 4ft and trellis it. The easiest way to do this is to purchase U stakes from a builder's supply store. Pound them in no more than ten feet apart down the center of the bed. Using bolts, attach shorter U stakes to the top of each trellis stake so as to get 6-7 feet of height to the trellis. Then attach lightweight fencing to the stakes starting about 1 foot off the ground. For this task, green vinyl coated fencing is especially attractive and long lasting.

Now, mentally divide the length of the bed into four equal lengths. On the trellis, in the first two quarters, plant pole snap beans like Fortex. Between April 15 and June 30, plant long beans on the third length of trellis and butter peas (also known as baby limas) on the fourth. Tasty long beans come from Evergreen Seeds. The tastiest butter peas are local heirlooms saved by the late George Stewart from his East Texas childhood. Stewart speckled peas are available in limited quantities to Urban Harvest members. Plant all of these seeds about 6-8 inches apart and, as with all the seeds discussed here, plant them one finger nail to one finger joint deep. Plant them in rows 6-8 inches apart on each side of the trellis.

Mentally again, draw lines from one end of the bed to the other on each side of the trellis, about one foot from the trellis. In the areas between these lines and the edge of the beds, plant bush snap beans in the first quarter of the bed between March 1st and the end of April and again from Aug. 1 to Sept. 15.

You might try a productive green variety like Derby or Contender, experiment with some of the tiny gourmet filet varieties, or for variety, grow the yellow wax ones. If planted 8 inches or more apart in all directions during warm but not hot temperatures, bush snap beans except filet will be very productive. They also will mature much earlier than the pole beans, so you will have a longer snap bean harvest. Harvest frequently before the seeds become large. If you haven't eaten really fresh snap beans lately, you have a treat coming!

In the second quarter of the bed away from the trellis, plant Edamame between March 1st and the end of April. These are planted just like bush beans. There are many great varieties of Edamame, but many of the seed catalog varieties don't sprout. Some local gardeners have bought dry soybeans at Whole Foods and planted those getting good results. In any case, once you get a variety you like, save seeds from year to year. If you are harvesting Edamame to eat, wait until the seeds enlarge and the pods just begin to turn color. Then boil for five minutes and eat. If you are saving seed, let the plant die before harvesting.

In the third quarter of the bed in the area away from the trellis, plant cream peas or purple hulls. There are varieties known as zipper because they are easy to shell and crowder because they are crowded many to a pod. These are some of the finest summer eating there is. They are also very carefree. Plant them from mid-April until early August. For fresh eating, harvest when the peas are big enough to eat and the pod turns color, making it easy to open the pods and shell the tender peas while watching TV or having a conversation.

In the last quarter of the bed, plant peanuts. These need at least one-foot spacings and do best with a 3-inch mulch. They produce peanuts when they flower (yellow), put out runners that burrow into the mulch, and grow the nuts underground. Harvest when the plant begins to die. You can find more information on the internet by searching Google for specific varieties, or paging through the on-line catalogs you find that way.

A word of caution: don't water the leaves or handle when wet since these plants get diseases from this. Otherwise, they are very easy to get good results.

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