

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Beans (also known as Blue Lake Beans, Common Beans, Green Beans, Haricot Verts and French Beans)



Beans in a garden in Belgium

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_beans_1.JPG

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

In the Indigenous language Nahuatl, 'exotl' is the name for green beans or Lima Beans. The Common Bean plant is a vining or climbing plant that is native to the Americas. It was eaten on a daily basis by the peoples of the Andes and Mesoamerica. Many other types of beans are descended from this type of bean. It can still be found growing wild in parts of Mexico.

When was this plant first documented?

Blue Lake Beans also known as Green Beans, Common Beans and French Beans were first depicted in a woodcut print made by Leonhart Fuchs in 1543 as part of a series of illustrations of herbs and plants

How many varieties of this plant are known?

Most of the foods we call "beans", "legumes", "lentils" and "pulses" belong to the same family. They have split off over time either due to human cultivation or the environment they were grown in. Currently, world gene banks hold about 40,000 bean varieties, although only a small number of these are mass-produced for regular consumption.

The following beans all come from what we now call Central and South America and were cultivated by Mesoamericans: Kidney Bean, Pinto Bean, Navy Bean (Cannellini, Haricot Beans / French Beans / Pole Beans / Bush Beans), Black Beans, Borlotti Beans, Lima Beans, Runner Beans, Flat Beans, Tepary Beans

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Beans were first cultivated in Mesoamerica around 8000 years ago in areas we now call Mexico and Peru. The beans cultivated in Mexico were predominantly black or white beans, with a few variants and were usually small seeded. The beans cultivated in Peru were more colourful and were larger. Over time and through trade, beans spread into much of North and South America.

Climbing beans are cultivated as part of the Three Sisters gardening technique, an efficient system that allows three crops to be grown together. Maize is planted in the middle of the plot, climbing beans are planted around the maize and squash or pumpkins are planted around the edge. The taller maize and climbing beans offer shade to the low lying pumpkin vines and the pumpkin vines stop the ground from getting too dried out which means the maize crops will be larger. The vines from the pumpkins and squash can be used as fertiliser. So, in combination, the plants work together.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

Beans were second to only maize in the Aztec diet and were a principal source of protein. They were often cooked, boiled and mashed and sometimes ground into a fine flour like powder.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

The Common Bean came to the UK in the 16th through Spanish and Portuguese traders. As it is easy to grow and fairly hardy (due to selective breeding by the peoples of Mesoamerica) it thrives in Europe and is now grown on (almost) every continent.

Special properties

The common bean is high in starch, protein, and dietary fibre, and is an excellent source of iron, potassium, selenium, molybdenum, thiamine, vitamin B6, and folate. The peoples of Mesoamerica ate beans daily as part of their diet as they are filling, nutritious and can be stored for long periods of time. The beans would be soaked in water for several hours and then boiled until they were soft. They would sometimes be mixed with other vegetables to make a soup or stew. Maize, beans and squash were the three staple foods used in almost every meal, to which nopales (a type of cactus) and tomatoes were usually added. Chilli and salt were also used in many dishes.

Fun facts

Green beans grow in two ways: they either grow on bushes or on plants with long vines. Bush plants produce a lot of beans at once. Climbing or vine type plants produce beans all through the growing season.

Green beans are good for your garden. They capture nitrogen from the air and release it into the soil which is good for plants that require nitrogen to grow (like maize, squash and tomatoes).

Resources edited by Phil Hindmarsh. Project Manager Marine Begault.

BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



Border Crossings Registered Charity No. 1048836

www.botanybay.org.uk