

## **BROAD BEANS – HOW TO GROW THE BEST**

### **From staple fare to animal feed to gourmet delight, broad beans have had a chequered history**

It's hard to praise the broad bean highly enough. Astonishingly, it's one of our most underrated vegetables, yet when eaten young and fresh, it's every bit as tasty as a sweet, tender pea.

Broad beans are an ancient crop, and were found by archaeologists at a dig near Nazareth and can be dated back to 6,500 BCE. Like so many of our old vegetables and herbs, they were assigned special, if not wholly credible properties. For the Egyptians, and later the Romans, they were even reckoned to carry souls from the present world to some future venue. In May, the ancient Romans held the Feast of Lamuria [bean meal]. Barefoot, the father of a household went outdoors at midnight, threw beans over his shoulder and banged drums proclaiming 9 times: "Shades of my ancestors depart." All this was designed to frighten off any passing ghosts who might try to consume the souls of relatives, on their way to the afterlife.

Until very recently these beans were used for drying, and when large and floury, provided a vital source of food for the lower orders before potatoes were brought from the New World in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The gentler classes despised beans and were keen to echo the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman, Dioscorides, who reckoned they were 'windy, flatulent, hard of digestion, causing troublesome dreams.'

Even today, flower show exhibitors are often keen to show massive, shapely broad beans, nestling between equally tasteless, gargantuan leeks and onions. So, all in all, it's hardly surprising that the humble broad bean has had such a bad press. Let me hereby launch a Tasty Bean Crusade.

Provided you have a medium-sized veg patch, there's enough space to grow some, and, with successive fortnightly sowings outside between mid March and mid May, you'll enjoy a good harvest. Earlier sowings will yield smaller pickings and you get a poorer crop later on. Broad beans are self-fertile and will produce beans early in the season before there are insect pollinators around, but in several trials, scientists have found that insect pollination significantly increases yields.

Other data has shown that broad beans may suffer from drought stress, which can happen with a strengthening summer sun, especially on light soil like mine. This drought stress makes the flowers drop and encourages the plants to put their energy into leaf growth. Now I freely admit that a poor return from later sowings has scarcely seemed worthwhile, especially with succulent runners and French beans coming on stream. But I'm all in favour of prolonging the broad bean season, so this year, I'll install a leaky hose in the bean patch to keep the ground moist and will carry on sowing till the middle of June. You'll be the first to hear what happens.

Given my insatiable demand for broad beans, you'd expect me to go for the earliest ones, however small the crop – and I do. All the seedsmen and textbooks urge us to make a November start with 'Aquadulce' or 'Super Aquadulce' varieties. Sow in the open ground, cover with a cloche and, hey presto, you'll start picking in May. Even our 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scot, James Justice, did likewise. Once the beans were growing away, he recommended: 'fasten them to the Walls [in the kitchen garden] near which they are Sown, with Reeds and Lists of Cloth drove into the Walls with Nails, which hastens them on and will prevent them from windwaving or breaking.' After all this trouble, he grew his beans till they lost their sweetness and stored them away for the winter. To have any chance of succeeding with overwintering beans in Scotland, you sow in October, in pots, plant out once 4-5cm tall, and cover with a cloche. The result? A crop 10-14 days earlier than a late January sowing under protection, and, of course, total failure this winter. With a later start, mine are forging ahead to a mouth-watering conclusion.

Another benefit from the later planting is the choice of varieties. Most of those on offer will grow to 1 metre, and to prevent Justice's 'windwaving', must be staked. This entails placing fanned branches to

each side of the row or linking stout sticks or small posts with a double line of string. Alternatively, you can select a dwarf variety, 'The Sutton', which has a final height of 30cm. These bushy little plants will stand up to any gale without any supports. The pods are admittedly smaller, but with more of them, the overall crop is much the same. Make life easy by going for the dwarfs.

Inevitably, as with every rule, there have to be exceptions. The tall 'Crimson Flowered Broad Bean', an old heritage variety, does look stunning while in flower, even if it needs staking. Another 2 varieties, 'Red Epicure' and 'Violetta', produce unusual red beans that look great beside the green ones, so are worth the extra trouble.

The broad bean has one final appeal: the scent of its flowers. As the poet, John Clare [1793-1864], wrote: 'My love is as sweet as a bean field in blossom.'