

Out of Africa/India/China – Cow Peas (aka, Black Eyed Peas)

I have been gardening for well over 50 years and not once grown black-eyed peas. In fact, I had not eaten them or paid any particular attention to their origins and values. I did purchase seed to grow as a green manure crop four years ago, but they remain unplanted to this day.

So, what happened to awaken this interest in black-eyed peas? Sandra, who sells the best eggs at the Las Cruces Farmer's Market, also sells green pod black-eyed peas in the spring and fall. Since Sandra's eggs are so good, I thought maybe she had something green I should know about. We talked one Saturday morning about the peas and the Chicago city girl turned small-scale farmer confessed that she grew them because her husband's folks liked them so much – started me to wondering. I bought a bag of green pods and began my own journey into this very old food.

When I planted the heirloom variety *Correnthies* from Mexico, I knew nothing about their soil needs, growth patterns, or anything else. Since my gardening is often trial and error exploration, I bought the seed and planted them in what seemed like the right place and way. Well, they germinated quickly and completely – so ended up too closely planted (no, I did not thin them). So, I had this bed of black-eyed peas planted on a 6" grid and all of them eagerly reaching for sunlight. For some weeks they appeared diseased with ruffled leaves, where they should have smooth ones. They did outgrow that problem and were soon standing 3' tall and beginning to sprawl, but without a single blossom or even an indication that they intended to bloom and set fruit. It didn't take long to figure out that the organic soil was too rich for them, and I only planned then to make mulch and fix nitrogen for the next crop in that bed.

Well, they did eventually begin to bloom and produce pods and then they got down right prolific, sprawling over the tomatoes, the beans, and the eggplant and climbing up into the amaranth. The indeterminate varieties will continue producing blossoms and green pods even though they are loaded with fully mature dry pods. It appears that will go on until frost stops them. The growth form of the indeterminate varieties is unusual for pod forming legumes in that they produce continuously from the same growth stem and will eventually produce rows of dry pods terminated with blossoms and new pods. Picking them requires some care not to damage the growth area.

There are three edible stages for the seedpods; one as a green bean, one as a shelly bean and one as a dry bean, besides producing edible foliage.

Further research into their origin revealed other theories from food historians about their country of origin and distribution. I have extracted some of the published accounts for you, rather than trying to summarize them.

"Cowpea...also called "long bean," "asparagus bean," and "yard long bean" because of the length of the pods, the cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* or *V. sesquipedalis* or *V. sinensis*) is, in fact, a bean. It has been cultivated since prehistoric times in tropical Asia (especially in India) and is a relative of the mung bean and other Asian legumes, suggesting a South

Asian origin for the plant. However, China has been proposed as another center of origin, and because the plant occurs in the wild in many parts of Africa, that continent may have been yet another cradle of the cowpea. It reached the New World via the slave trade and is today cultivated throughout the tropical and subtropical world. The cowpea comes in a number of varieties. Black-eyed peas are perhaps the best known of these in the United States...Crowder peas and field peas are other favorites, especially in the South. Prior to the Civil war, cowpeas were sometimes given to slaves but they were used mostly for animal fodder." ---Cambridge World History of Food, Kenneth F. Kiple & Kriemhild Conee Ornelas [Cambridge University Press:Cambridge] 2000, Volume Two (p. 1764)

"Black-eyed peas...are the seeds of a plant of the pea family...As their Latin name, *Vigna sinensis* suggests, they originated in China, and are still widely used there for food..." ---An A to Z of Food and Drink, John Ayto [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 2002 (p. 30-1)

"Cowpea...originated in Africa but soon spread to Europe, where it was known during the classical era, and to Asia, where it became very popular. In the 16th century it was taken to America by the Spanish." ---Oxford Companion to Food, Alan Davidson [Oxford University Press:Oxford] 1999 (p. 220)

"The cowpea (Sanskrit *nishpava*, Hindi *lobia* and *showli*, Tamil *karamani*) came to India from West Africa...its first mentioned as *nishpava* in Buddhist canonical literature (c. 400 BC)." ---A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food, K.T. Achaya oxford University Press: Delhi] 1998 (p. 55)

"The black-eyed pea or cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata-V. sinensis*), is believed by most to have come from Africa." ---Food in China: A Cultural and Historical Inquiry, Frederick J. Simoons [CRC Press: Boca Raton FL] 1991 (p. 83)

The written record clearly states that there were many regional varieties of cowpeas in Spain prior to that country's world explorations and the subsequent introduction of the New World beans. What I find fascinating is that by the late 1600s cowpeas were in danger of extinction in Spain, having been rapidly replaced by New World beans, which were not as drought tolerant or disease resistant. Did they taste better, or produce more edible food per acre, or did they just become the new fashion food of 16th century Spain?

Cow peas undoubtedly arrived in the Americas long before "slavery" and, in fact, have been introduced many times, as many cultivars, from many sources, as you would expect about a food plant as diverse, as old and as dependable as cow peas. They did not leave home without them!

till next time,

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There is an illustrated version of this article at
<http://www.darrolshillingburg.com/GardenSite/MasterGardener.html>