

Out of Africa – Black Eyed Peas

Domesticated from some wild ancestor by early farmers of the African savanna, the black-eyed pea rose from the Sudanic cradle of agriculture and spread by way of Egypt or Arabia to Asia and the Mediterranean, eventually arriving in the U.S. with early immigrants and slaves. However, it did not evolve alone, but came into agricultural existence along with drought tolerant varieties of millet and okra.

The common name Black Eyed Pea, *Vigna unguiculata* (L.), is descriptive of only one group of this now very diverse species, with others groups barely resembling their familiar black-eyed namesake (California Black Eyed Pea). This extreme variability has led to many commercial cultivars grouped by the variance in bean shape, size, and color.

- Blackeyed or purpleeye peas - the seeds are white with a black eye round the hilum. The 'eye' can be other colors, purple or shades of red being common. The seeds are not tightly packed or 'crowded' in the pod and are kidney or oblong in shape.
- Browneye peas - pods range in color from green to lavender. The immature seeds, when cooked, are a medium to dark brown, very tender, and have a delicate flavor.
- Crowder peas - seeds are black, speckled, brown or brown-eyed and are 'crowded' in the pod, hence the name. They also tend to be globular in shape.
- Cream - seeds are cream colored and not crowded in the pods - an intermediate between black-eyed and Crowder types.
- White acre type - seeds are kidney shaped with a blunt end, semi-crowded, and generally tan in color. Pods are stiff and the seeds tend to be small.
- Clay types - these rarely grown older varieties are medium to dark brown in color and kidney shaped.
- Forage cultivars - adapted for use as fodder, or cover crop use.

You can also locate a diversity of non-commercial cultivars through those smaller seed companies and seed banks that focus on regional and heirloom varieties.

Why to Grow Them

Because of the characteristics of its wild ancestor, black-eyed peas are ideal food plants for our area and were quickly adopted by local native farmers in arid regions. These nitrogen-fixing legumes grow and produce well at relatively low fertility levels, but usually respond to additional phosphorous. They tolerate a wide range of soil ph, but prefer neutral to acid soils. Even so, I have had no difficulty growing them at the 7.5-8.5 ph common in this area. Black-eyed peas are very deep rooted, drought tolerant and grow here from frost to frost if you plant any of the indeterminate varieties. In desert regions without frost, they may grow as a weak perennial and produce for multiple years. Even though the indeterminate varieties are not true climbers, they will sprawl vigorously and

grow over other taller crops. They are particularly well adapted to nutrient poor sandy soils and do not tolerate heavy, water logged soils.

Black-eyed peas can be used to add nitrogen and organic matter to the soil and provide an excellent way to begin a garden in marginal soils. For a green manure crop plant late in the season so the first frost will kill them before blooming (a killed mulch technique). On new soils, you will get best results by using a black-eyed pea inoculant for your first planting. You can follow them with a cold tolerant variety of shelling or edible pod pea, or with fava beans and have a spring garden soil enriched with both organic matter and nitrogen.

Black-eyed peas are rich in protein averaging 23–25% in the dried bean. Although not generally eaten as a green in this country, in other counties it is harvested as a fresh green and dried for winter use. You can pick young leaves for greens until the plants begin to bloom and only slightly diminish the production of green pods and dried beans.

Where to Find Them

Commercial varieties are easily available from most seed suppliers. For those rarer heirloom varieties, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (www.rareseeds.com) is the best place to begin. They offer 30 varieties in their web seed catalog. For those varieties grown by local southwest and Mexico farmers, Native Seed SEARCH (www.nativeseeds.com) is the place to go. They offer five varieties in this years' web catalog.

till next time,

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