

LEGUME VARIETIES

If you're willing to spend what it takes on preserved meats and dairy products it's not necessary to store legumes at all. But most people do choose to keep a selection of beans, peas, and lentils in their larders either for reasons of economy, because they like them, or both. There are few non-animal foods that contain the amount of protein to be found in legumes with the varieties commonly available in the U.S. ranging from 20%-35%. As with most non-animal proteins, they are not complete in themselves for purposes of human nutrition, but become so when they are combined with the incomplete proteins found in grains. This is why grains and legumes are so often served together the world around.

The legume family, of which all beans, peas, lentils, and peanuts are a part, is one of the largest in the plant kingdom. Because of this and the many thousands of years of cultivation and development that man has given them on several continents the variety of edible legumes available to us is huge. Both their appearance and their names are colorful and varied. They range from "adzuki beans", a type of soybean from the Orient, to "zipper peas", a common field-pea here in the Southern U.S. Their color can range from a clean white, to deep red, dull green to flat black with thousands of mixtures and patterns in between.

In spite of this incredible variety, many legumes are largely interchangeable in cooking, although some dishes just wouldn't be the same if a different type were used. Below is a partial list of common legumes.

ADZUKI BEANS:

These small, deep red beans are very popular in Japan, China and other Asian nations, but are not as well known in the U.S. They are actually a cousin of the soybean and are commonly used in producing sweet bean paste for Chinese buns and other dishes. Pressure cooking will sometimes impart a bitter flavor so they are best presoaked then boiled in the conventional fashion. Their flavor is somewhat milder than kidney or small red beans, but they can serve as an adequate substitute for either in chili and other dishes in which those beans are commonly used.

BLACK BEANS:

Also known as "turtle beans", they are small, dark brownishblack and oval-shaped. Well known in Cuban black bean soup and commonly used in Central and South America and in China. They tend to bleed

darkly when cooked so they are not well suited to being combined with other beans, lest they give the entire pot a muddy appearance. The skins of black beans also slip off easily so for this reason they are generally not recommended for pressure cooking for fear of clogging the vent. This can be lessened by not presoaking before cooking.

BLACK-EYED PEAS:

Also known as “cowpeas” or “field peas” there are many varieties these peas eaten across the Southern United States, Mexico, and Africa with black-eyed peas being the most commonly known in the U.S. The coloring of field-peas is as varied as the rest of the legume family, with black-eyed peas being small, oval shaped with an overall creamy color and, of course, their distinctive blackeye. Dried field-peas cook very quickly and combine very tastily with either rice or cornbread and are often eaten as Hoppin’ John every New Years for luck. They’re also reputed to produce less flatulence than many other beans.

CHICKPEAS:

Also known as the “garbanzo bean” or “cecci pea” (or bean), they tend to be a creamy or tan color, rather lumpily roundish and larger than dried garden peas. Many have eaten the nutty flavored chick-pea, even if they’ve never seen a whole one. They are the prime ingredient in hummus and falafel and are one of the oldest cultivated legume species known, going back as far as 5400 B.C. in the Near East. Chickpeas tend to remain firmer when cooked than other legumes and can add a pleasant texture to many foods. I like them in red spaghetti sauces in particular and they are often used in Spanish cuisine in a tomato-based sauce. Roasted brown then ground they have also served as a coffee substitute.

FAVA BEANS:

Not as well known in the U.S. as in Europe and the Mediterranean favas are also known as “broad beans” or “horse beans” being broad in shape, flat and reddish brown in color. This is one of the oldest legume species in European cultivation, but it does require more effort to consume. The hull of the bean is tough and not conducive to being tenderized by cooking so is often peeled away. The skinless bean falls apart so is made into a puree. A small number of people with Mediterranean ancestry have a genetic sensitivity to the blossom pollens and undercooked beans, a condition known as “favism” so should avoid consuming them.

GREAT NORTHERN BEANS:

A large white bean about twice the size of navy beans they are typically bean flavored and are frequently favored for soups, salads, casseroles, and baked beans. One of the more commonly eaten in the U.S. Milled into meal these mild flavored beans can be included in many baked goods as a protein booster or used to thicken soups and stews.

KIDNEY BEANS:

Like the rest of the family, kidney beans can be found in wide variety. They may be white, mottled or a light or dark red color with their distinctive kidney shape. Probably best known here in the U.S. for their use in chili and bean salads, they figure prominently in Mexican, Brazilian and Chinese cuisine.

LENTILS:

Lentils are an odd lot. They don't fit in with either the beans or the peas and occupy a place by themselves. Their shape is different from other legumes being roundish little discs with colors ranging from muddy brown, to green to a rather bright orangish-red. They cook very quickly and have a distinctive mildly peppery flavor. They are much used in Far Eastern cuisine from India to China. Next to mung beans they make excellent sprouts though their peppery flavor tends to strengthen somewhat so are best mixed with milder sprouts.

LIMA BEANS:

In the Southern U.S., they are also commonly called "butter beans". Limas are one of the most common legumes, found in this country in all manner of preservation from the young small beans to the large fully mature type. Their flavor is pleasant, but a little bland. Their shape is rather flat and broad with colors ranging from pale green to speckled cream and purple. They combine very well with rice.

MUNG BEANS:

Best known here in the States in their sprouted form, they are quite common in Indian and other Asian cuisines and are a close relative of the field peas (cowpeas). Their shape is generally round, fairly small with color ranging from a medium green to so dark as to be nearly black. They cook quickly and presoaking is not generally needed.

NAVY BEANS:

Smaller than Great Northerns these petite sized beans are also sometimes known as pea beans. They are the stars of Navy and Senate Bean Soups, favored for many baked bean dishes, and are most often chosen for use in commercial pork and beans. They retain their shape well when cooked. Ground into meal they can be added to many soups and stews without overpowering them.

PEANUTS (Groundnuts):

The peanut is not actually a nut at all, but a legume. They are another odd species not much like the more familiar beans and peas. Peanuts have a high protein percentage and even more fat. Whatever their classification peanuts are certainly not unfamiliar to U.S. eaters. They are one of the two legume species commonly grown for oilseed in this country, and are also used for peanut butter, and boiled or roasted peanuts. Peanut butter (without excessive added sweeteners) can add body and flavor to sauces, gravies, soups, and stews. Many Central and South American, African, Chinese, and Thai dishes incorporate peanuts so they are useful for much more than just a snack food or cooking oil.

PEAS, GREEN OR YELLOW:

More often found as split peas though whole peas can sometimes be had. The yellow variety has become somewhat uncommon but has a milder flavor than the green types which well lends them to blending inconspicuously into other foods. Probably best known in split pea soup, particularly with a smoky chunk of ham added. They are also used in Indian cuisine, especially dals. Whole peas need soaking, but split peas can be cooked as is. Split peas and pea meal makes an excellent thickener for soups and stews. Because splitting damages the pea, this more processed form does not keep for as long as whole peas unless given special packaging.

PINK AND RED BEANS:

Related to the kidney bean these are smaller in size but similar in flavor. The pink bean has a more delicate flavor than the red. They are both often favored for use in chili and widely used across the American Southwest, Mexico, and Latin America. They can add nicely to the color variety in multibean soups.

PINTO BEANS:

Anyone who has eaten Tex-Mex food has likely had the pinto bean. It is probably the most widely consumed legume in the U.S., particularly in the Southwestern portion of the country. Stereotypically bean shaped, it has a dappled pattern of tans and browns on its shell. Pintos have a flavor that blends well with many foods. When ground together with great northern or navy beans they make my favorite homemade version of falafel. When milled into a meal pintos will cook in mere minutes, making a near instant form of refried bean.

SOYBEANS:

The soybean is by far the legume with the highest protein content in large scale commercial production and it's amino acid profile is the most nearly complete for human nutrition. Alongside the peanut it is the other common legume oilseed. The beans themselves are small, round, and with a multitude of different shades though tan seems to be the most common that I've seen. Because of their high oil content, they are more sensitive to oxygen exposure than other legumes and precautions should be taken accordingly if they are to be kept for more than a year in storage, especially if they are to be processed for soymilk or tofu. Although the U.S. grows a large percentage of the global supply, we consume virtually none of them directly. Most go into cattle feed, are used by industry, or exported. What does get eaten directly has usually been intensively processed. Soybean products range from soymilk to tofu, to tempeh, to textured vegetable protein (TVP) and hundreds of other forms. They don't lend themselves well to merely being boiled until done then eaten the way other beans and peas do. For this reason, if you plan on keeping some as a part of your storage program you would be well served to begin to learn how to process and prepare them now while you're not under pressure to produce. This way you can throw out your failures and order pizza, rather than having to choke them down, regardless.