

Broad beans



Broad beans are a crop awaited with anticipation – a seasonal feast fresh from the garden for no more than ten weeks in spring.

Part of their popularity is due to their ease of growth as broad beans are undemanding plants that can be grown from cold temperate regions through to subtropical areas.

When to plant

Get organised as seeds are sown to avoid the heat. Don't plant beans too early as plants will grow tall but flowering is delayed which reduces cropping. Late planting results in low yields too as broad beans are affected by high temperatures in late spring.

Pod set is regulated by day length and temperature which should ideally be about 20°C. Broad beans take 14 to 20 weeks to reach maturity.

Planting times

Sub tropical climates: March to May

Temperate and Mediterranean climates: late April to June

Cool climates: July to September

Soil improvement

Choose a sunny spot and well drained soil, though broad beans will tolerate heavy soil and brief water logging better than most vegetables. Seeds can rot in very wet conditions.

Broad beans are not heavy feeders and being legumes produce some of the nitrogen they need from bacteria in the nodules on the roots. Add a handful of lime per square metre to acidic soils and compost and a complete fertiliser to all soils. Do not over fertilise as excess nitrogen can lead to excessive leaf growth and low yields.

How to plant

Plant two or three times at about three-week intervals to spread the harvest. Sow seeds 12cm to 15 cm apart in single rows, 80 cm apart, about 4cm deep.

In windy areas install a windbreak, though good air movement reduces fungal diseases.

All except dwarf plants need staking. Place stakes both sides of the row and connect stakes with twine to support growing plants.

Cut the tops off plants when they reach 1.5m or if they get attacked by black fly.

Flowering

Plants have white and black pea shaped flowers which are frost sensitive. To increase flowering pinch out the growing tip with the thumb and forefinger when the first flowers appear.

Flower may not pollinate if pollinating insects are absent.

Harvest

Beans come from the bottom of the flower as it withers and ripen from the base of the plant upwards, so check the lowest pods regularly as they begin to swell. Pick immature pods when they are little finger sized and cook them whole, pod and all.

Most people wait until pods are the thickness of a thumb, and 10cm long or bigger, before the skin becomes tough and leathery. Split pods and remove the beans.

Fingernail-sized beans in small pods can be eaten as is but anything bigger should be double shelled. Blanch podded beans for a minute in boiling water and remove the white outer skin to reveal the tender green bean inside.

Shelled beans can be frozen after being blanched for two minutes in boiling water. Dry excess beans and store in air tight container for next year's sowing or rehydrate for soups and stews.

After harvest plough plants back into the soil or add them to the compost heap.

Pests

The main pest of beans is the chocolate spot fungus (*Botrytis fabae*). Fungal spores can survive in the soil for several years so practice crop rotation and don't save infected seed which harbour the disease.

Varieties

Aquadulce – dwarf and tall forms, early cropping, cold climates (Diggers Seeds,

Eden Seeds, Fairbank Seeds, The Lost Seed, Green Harvest)

Early Long Pod - to 1.5m, big pods (Yates)

Coles Dwarf Prolific - to 1m, heavy crops (The Lost Seed, Mr Fothergill's, Yates)

Peruvian Emerald - hot climates, sow mid winter, prolific (Yilgarn Traders Drylands Permaculture Nursery)