

Fava Beans *Vicia faba* L.

Nearly as old as sin and twice as nutritious, fava bean has traveled the globe with explorers, settlers and traders. As a food crop, it is more versatile than pinto beans and as cold hardy as peas. And yet you can only find them as dried or canned beans in specialty stores and rarely as snap beans at farmers markets. At east and west coast farmers markets, the plants are sold as gourmet greens and make an excellent addition to salads. They also excel as a green manure crop and thrive here at all seasons except summer. In spite of all those virtues they remain little known and poorly appreciated. Other names for them are Horse, Broad, Windsor, English Dwarf Bean, Tick, Pigeon, Bell, Haba, Feve (French) and Silkworm beans.

History

Fava beans were developed as an agricultural crop from wild ancestors in the Mediterranean Basin and North Africa more than nine thousand years ago. They are one of the plants cultivated in early gardens and fields along with peas, lentils and garbanzo beans and have been found in kitchen middens from prehistoric Swiss lake sites in Europe. The Mediterranean Basin was the center of production until the 1950s when China began producing that region and exporting to the world. Juan Oñate brought fava beans into the northern frontier of New Spain, (New Mexico) in 1598 and during subsequent settlements.

Growing in Winter

You can still plant fava beans in October and get some growth before nighttime chill stalls out the plants. Root growth will continue through winter so the plants are ready for rapid growth with warmer spring nights. In winter, you can pick some terminal leaves for salads and steamed vegetables without stunting spring growth.

Growing in Spring

Spring will bring on rapid plant growth and blossoms. The young green bean pods are delicious raw, steamed or in stir-fried dishes. Once the pods are filled out, you can shell the beans and cook them like green lima beans, while leaving some to ripen for drying. If you are sowing seeds in spring, do it early as fava beans have little heat tolerance while blooming and setting pods – a late spring planting will be disappointing.

Green Manure

The deep vigorous root system of fava beans opens up the soil and fixes nitrogen – two to four tons per acre. About half of that is available to the following crop. If you are practicing no-till, you can cut out some fava beans and set in transplants of early spring crops. I have even used that strategy for setting out tomato transplants in April, using the

partial shade and windbreak of the fava beans to shelter the tomatoes. However, beware of the dangers of sheltering leafhoppers in the bean patch. As the season warms up, cut off the fava beans and use them as mulch – eventually returning the organic matter and nitrogen to the soil. Besides fixing nitrogen and growing great mulch there is also the acidifying effects of fava bean root exudates in the soil and the benefit that has on mineral uptake for other plants. For more on the results of this Chinese research and its implications for companion planting in our alkali soils read the article, *Getting to the Root of Productivity* from the August 2007 MG newsletter – [link](#).

Culturing

When planting as a food crop, space them on a six to seven inch grid – a slightly wider spacing is recommended for green manure cropping. For best results here, sow seeds one to 2 inches deep in September-October and begin harvesting in early spring. Once the seed have germinated and the plants are established they are reasonably drought tolerant, but require additional watering through winter.

Varieties

I have found that the small seeded varieties produce better than the large seeded Windsor types. My preferred varieties are Guatemalan Purple and Sweet Loraine. Both grow about three feet tall, tolerate cold temperatures down to 10F and tolerate heat better than Windsor types. The greens, young pods and shelly beans also have excellent flavor. Sweet Loraine was developed for green manure cropping, but lost no flavor in the process – so you get the best of both characteristics.