

# Growing Lablab

## Lablab

### The plant

Lablab is a favourite vegetable in the tropics as it can stand a range of conditions from drought to poor or contaminated soil, and consistently crops over a long period. In more temperate climates it is a more challenging plant and does not produce pods so well, but it can still be rewarding to grow. They have beautiful flowers and are decorative regardless of a crop.

There is some evidence that lablab plants grown from seeds saved in this country crop better and earlier as they are becoming more adapted to the climate in the UK.

### Varieties and plant material

Lablab is incredibly variable, as might be expected from a plant, which has been cultivated for around 3000 years. Pod colour varies from deep purple to a greyish white, speckled to plain green and may have a sharp point at one end, be puffy, round or flat, scimitar shaped or blade-like. The pods often have a peculiarly wrinkled and rough edge down the side, which doesn't split.

In some parts of India, the small, curved podded forms, which are eaten podded like green peas are called papri or papapdi, while the long flatter types are known as liva. The rounder, more French bean-like sorts are called val or valor. The lightly scented flowers can be carried singly or in dense spikes, hence one of the alternative names, hyacinth bean, and can be any colour from deep purple through pink to pure white.

Some cultivars of lablab only flower in the equal day and night lengths of the tropics, but others are day neutral so will crop in the UK.

Sadly at present there is a very limited range of cultivars available in Britain and only 'Ruby Moon' is commonly sold, which is a decorative variety grown for its ornamental purple flowers. Some people have saved seeds from fresh lablab (sold in Asian shops) with varying degrees of success, and



various companies sell seeds via the Internet. 'Rongai' and 'Ipsa 2' are both suitable for culture in our conditions, if you can locate a supply.

### Planting and site

Lablab likes a long growing season to do best, so sow 2 or 3 seeds in a general purpose potting compost in a 9cm/3in pot in mid April. Germination temperature is around 18-21°C/65-70°F, and seeds take anything from 10-25 days to emerge.

Keep seedlings in a warm light place and pot up as they grow. Some cultivars climb, some are dwarf but all rarely begin to require support until they have at least five or six true leaves.

Once the weather is warm enough to transplant French beans, you can harden off the lablab and plant outside, but they will appreciate the better conditions in a polytunnel or cold greenhouse. Space plants 15cm/6in apart or 2 plants to a pole if climbers. If using a grow bag, allow three plants per bag; if in pots, a 30cm/12in pot is the minimum diameter needed.

Lablab will grow in poor soil but prefers a well cultivated fertile plot, ideally with a compost trench (as for runner beans) to help retain moisture. The plants need full sun and shelter from cold winds.

### Pests, weeds and diseases

Lablab doesn't suffer from many problems, as it's a new plant to the UK, although red spider mites may find them attractive in dry conditions. In dry weather pods often drop off due to irregular water supply, so keeping the plants moist at the roots is important. During cold wet weather the plants often stand still and refuse to grow. If the weather persists poorly, they may never mature further but often revive as the conditions improve and go on to flower and fruit.



### Harvesting and storage

Lablabs tend not to flower until quite late in the season, so you rarely have a glut (unlike runner or French beans), as the harvest time is so short. In some African cultures the young leaves are eaten as a green vegetable, and are a valuable source of protein.

The flowers are self fertile, like French beans. Pick lablabs as soon as they are large enough to eat, and still tender: the papri cultivars should be left until seeds have formed inside the pods and then podded like peas.

Papri will freeze well if you are lucky enough to have a surplus, if blanched for 1 minute before freezing. Liva and val don't store well so are best eaten fresh. Some strains may have seeds, which are toxic if eaten raw, so never eat raw lablab pods or beans, and when cooking boil hard for several minutes, like dried French beans. There is a popular belief that dark cultivars have more toxins than the white or green ones, but this is not necessarily true.

### Saving Seed

Lablabs don't cross with other bean species so the plants shouldn't need isolating unless somebody on your allotment site is also growing them. Select a few plants to leave pods to ripen from the first, rather than picking for food, as this gives them the longest time to mature in our uncertain weather:

Some cultivars drop their seeds as soon as the pods are ripe, others dry on the plant, but unfortunately there is no way of telling in advance unless you know the variety. Allow the pods to hang on the plants until dry or the frosts, whichever comes first, and dry out further on trays indoors before shelling and final drying of the beans.

If you find a particularly good strain, it is sometimes possible to save the plant by digging up the (quite large) roots and storing them in a pot overwinter somewhere frost-free, like a dahlia.



*This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.*

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