

# Growing Yard Long Beans

*Vigna sesquipedalis*

## The plant

Yard long beans are climbing members of the Fabaceae (previously and better known as legumes!). They are close relatives of the cowpea, which is known in this country as black-eyed peas: these have shorter pods and do not climb. Yard-long beans, as the name suggests, differ from cowpeas in their very slender long green beans, which have a beautifully delicate flavour.

Other names for yard-long beans include chori (Hindi), bora (Caribbean) and snake bean.

## Varieties

We are currently still investigating which varieties grow best, but our current favourite is Asparagus Long Green. Some varieties are bred for tropical conditions, with equal length of day and night, and are not suitable for the UK unless grown with supplementary lighting or heating. Varieties available commercially include a burgundy red and a striped podded form.

Yard long beans from Africa are often black seeded, while those from Asia and America are usually brownish in colour.

## Cultivation

Yard long bean is a dry season tropical crop, which favours hot temperatures. It really needs a tunnel or a glasshouse to get any sort of worthwhile crop, although it has been known to produce beans outside in hot summers. Sow into small pots inside in mid April, to get the plants going. Transplant into the final position once all risk of frost has passed in late May or early June.

They can be grown similar to runner beans, up poles made into wigwams in groups of 6 or 8 plants. Plants twine anticlockwise and will climb as tall as runner beans. Water plants in thoroughly after transplanting, but subsequently, don't over-water, as they are used to growing under dry conditions. They will benefit from a light dressing



of garden or green waste compost before transplanting but should not be grown in a soil over-rich in nitrogen.

Yard long beans are not troubled by too many pests and diseases, but may develop low levels of red spider mite if conditions are very hot and dry.



*Flowers of yard-long bean*



*A healthy young plant*



*Bundles of harvested yard long beans*

### Harvesting

Yard long beans start to flower in mid June, producing deep purple-blue flowers.

These open overnight and are only seen open in early mornings or on dull days. They are pollinated by a wide range of insects, including the heavier species of flies, moths or bumble-bees, so glasshouse doors should be left open if possible at night to allow insects in.

We started to harvest beans from mid July onwards. Beans should be harvested when they are no thicker than a bic biro otherwise they turn leathery. Sadly, if a bean ever reaches a yard long it's likely to be over-mature and very tough.

Once bean production starts, it is important to pick at least twice a week, to ensure production continues. The entire pods are eaten, and should be consumed within 1 or 2 days after picking.

### Growing for seed

Yard-long beans do not cross with other bean species such as French or runner beans so plants don't need to be grown in isolation.

Towards the end of the season, allow a number of healthy pods to grow to a larger size, turn yellow and dry out. These should be then placed in a warm dry place to allow the seeds to ripen and dry completely. If you are lucky enough to have a surplus of yard-long beans the excess seeds can be dried for cooking.

### Uses

The young green beans are eaten as whole pods, and only need very light cooking. They are generally cut into short lengths then steamed and stir fried. They are also particularly good in curries. Mature dried beans store well when dried but should be soaked overnight before cooking, like other pulses, and boiled vigorously for ten minutes before further simmering until tender, to destroy any possible toxins. In some cultures the young leaves are eaten as a green cooked vegetable, and are higher in protein than the young pods.

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