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FOOD

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Beans, like these old-fashioned pole beans, are among the earliest of foods to be cultivated.

Old timey beans

BY LAURA ANGEL HUNT

There isn't much on earth that's older than beans. Thought to be native to the Americas, the history of this food staple is so extensive that no one really knows for certain where they originated. Some, believing that Native Americans descend from one of the lost tribes of Israel, think that beans came with them from the Middle East to the Americas, and were scattered along with the oft scattered Hebrews wherever they went.

Whether in the satchels of lost wonderers, the buckskin bags of Native hunter-gatherers or the poke sacks of runaway slaves, beans became the subsistence food of travelers long, long ago, and are a truly global cuisine that few cultures could have survived without.

Many old bean varieties tend to have names attaching them to the people that grew them or the place where they were most often grown. Native American names are common, such as the familiar Cherokee Trail of Tears, Hidatsa Shield and Arikara beans. Among a host of European varieties are the colorful speckled purple Dutch Dragon's Tongue, and Mayflower beans, said to have been carried over on the Mayflower by a pilgrim named Ann Hutchinson.

Strings Attached

In addition to their interesting names, most early beans also came with strings. That is, in order to make the pods edible one had to remove the tough, fibrous "strings" that ran along one or both sides of the beans. These strings would not break down during cooking, no matter how long a bean in the shell was simmered.

The earliest known stringless bean is called the Lazy Housewife bean, so called because housewives—presumably the primary bean stringers—could skip that part of the process with this bean. In 1884, a New York entrepreneur named Calvin N. Keeney created the first stringless bean for the large market, called the Stringless Refugee Wax. It was a bred from a very old variety that were simply called "Refugee" beans, a staple commonly carried by French Huguenots fleeing to America to escape religious persecution. After Keeney's breakthrough, all manner of stringless beans were developed, and today almost all of the beans grown both commercially and privately are stringless.



The smooth, shiny shells of Appalachian greasy back beans makes them look like they've been coated with grease.

Appalachian Heirlooms

Of the remaining true string beans, many are old pole bean varieties that have been preserved and grown for generations by Appalachian families in isolated mountain communities and, like a lot of old heirlooms, have colorful names and sometimes interesting stories to go with them.

This year I decided for the first time to grow a couple of old fashioned pole beans, and quickly learned that growing and preparing these big, beautiful beans is a like trip down memory lane. Snapping them (and, unlike the newer hybrids these do make quite a snap!), will send you back in time to your grandmother's front porch so quickly that you won't mind removing those strings one bit.

Our grandparents knew that by cooking up a mess of old timey pole beans, they could still have a filling meal even when meat was in short supply. Heirloom pole beans generally get much bigger than bush beans or newer hybrids. Because you can let the actual bean "seed" fully form before picking them, it takes just a few of these beauties to make a serving. Initially, I had trouble letting them get to full size, thinking (wrongly) that they would get tough, but by waiting and letting them fill out, they add up to a meal's worth very quickly. The added protein from the fully formed beans makes them much more satisfying than ordinary green beans.

I chose to grow two types of Appalachian heirloom beans this year. The first, called turkey



Freshly hung turkey crow beans begin the lengthy drying process to become "leather britches" beans.

crow beans, originally came from a family in the Cumberland Gap, where legend says that a hunter found a few of these beans in the crow of a turkey he'd bagged. He thought he would try planting the beans, and they grew. If that weren't interesting enough, the Cumberland Gap region is such an important touchstone for so many Kentucky families that it was hard to resist choosing these.

The second type that I grew are called greasy back beans. These beans have a slick, shiny look, hence the name. I chose them because they resemble the beans that my grandmother, Carrie Moseley Hunt cooking up on her giant wood-fired kitchen along with fried chicken, both fresh from her yard. Choosing heirloom vegetables, fruits and even flowers is a great way to honor the generations past.

Leather Britches

The earliest way that beans were preserved was by drying them into what eventually came to be known as leather britches beans. Although pole beans are most often used, the name does refer not to a particular variety, but rather the method of stringing the whole pods and hanging them to dry. The Cherokee preserved beans this way, calling them A-ni-ka-yo-sv-hi-tsu-ya. Early settlers called them leather britches because as the pods dried they turned took on the appearance of tiny pairs of the breeches commonly worn by Native American warriors.

To make leather britches beans, you will need some sturdy white thread or narrow twine, and a needle with an eye big enough to fit the thread. Break the ends off of the beans and remove the tough strings. Then thread the beans one at a time, taking care not to go through an actual bean seed as this will make it difficult to remove the thread later. Try to fit enough beans for one meal onto each thread. (At this point,

some like to soak the beans for a few minutes in salt brine to help inhibit insects, but that is up to you.) Hang the beans in a warm, dry place until they are completely dry and brittle. The process could take several weeks, depending on the level of humidity. The Cherokee dry their beans in the sun, some others prefer to dry them out of direct sunlight.

After they are thoroughly dried, store them in a cool, dry place away from bright light. As long as you keep insects, light and moisture away from them they will store indefinitely. Leather britches beans can be cooked either in the pod or shelled out for what are called "shucky beans."

To Cook Leather Britches Beans (A-ni-ka-yo-sv-hi-tsu-ya)

Most southern cooks prepare leather britches beans in the traditional manner of the Cherokee, which is to soak them overnight, drain, and cover with fresh water before cooking most of the day over very low heat with salt and/or meat grease. A few folks suggest using boiling water to pour over the beans for the initial soaking.

Bean expert Bill Best, of the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center, prefers soaking them for about 12 hours, then changing the water and soaking for about 4 hours more before finally cooking them the same as fresh green beans.

For the actual cooking process, a good rule of thumb is 3-4 cups of water for every 1 cup of beans in the shell, taking care to check from time to time and add more water if necessary. Let them cook a minimum of 4 hours.

To make shucky beans from leather britches beans: Simply break the bean pods in half and then rub them between your palms to remove the shells. Pick the beans out of the shells, rinse them well and then prepare them as you would any dried bean.