

French Beans



Plant group: Legumes

Start under cover: March – July

Plant out: May – August

Sow Directly: April - July

Harvest: May - October

Choosing Seed

Use organic seed where possible. Good sources are:

The Reading Food Growing Network (www.readingfoodgrowingnetwork.org.uk) seed swap events,

The Organic Gardening Catalogue (www.organiccatalogue.com)

or the Seed Co-operative (www.seedcooperative.org.uk)

Try these varieties: Saxa (Dwarf), Borlotto (Dwarf), Cobra (Climbing), Eva (Climbing)

Sowing and Planting

Sow under cover from March for a crop in June, or directly outside from mid-spring, and as late as July for an autumn harvest. Beans grow best in a sunny, sheltered spot. Some varieties can be heavy croppers, so you might not need very many plants if just growing for yourself. If you have time, you can soak the seeds for half an hour to soften their skins before sowing. For indoor sowings, try toilet roll inners or root trainers to get good root development. Allow them to get to a few cms tall before planting out and they will stand a better chance against slug attack.

Climbing varieties need a framework to grow up. This can be canes in a row or in a tepee shape – make sure the structure is stable enough to withstand windy days. Allow at least 20cm between plants. Water well if the weather is dry, and especially from the flowering stage onwards.

Harvesting

Harvest before the beans start to bulge too much in their pods, most varieties are at their best when small and slim. Borlotto Regular picking is recommended to stimulate the plant to produce more pods. Pinch out the tops of the plants if they are outgrowing their support, or wind them along their canes.

At the end of the season, cut the plants down to the ground and leave the roots in to break down and release nitrogen into the soil, fertilising your plot.

Storing

If you are planning to dry some beans, either for storing to eat (Borlotto are particularly good for this) or to use as next year's seed, then leave the pods on the plant until the weather is due to turn wet, then cut the plant and hang up somewhere airy until really dry. Shell the beans and allow to dry for a few more days on kitchen paper. Once they are completely dry, store in an airtight container. It is worth putting the sealed container in the freezer for a week immediately after drying, to kill off any insect eggs that may have found their way into your harvest.