

# Bean Season

Bill Ward II

August is a gardener's busiest month. Picking, canning, pickling, freezing, drying, and other methods of "putting up" buckets of fresh vegetables is in full swing. And aside from tomatoes and sweet corn, snap beans take center stage in Johnson County. Why? Because they're delicious!

*Phaseolus vulgaris* (the scientific albeit not delicious sounding name of the common bean) is one of the oldest New World crops. Beans have been grown in Appalachia for at least 900 years, but their origins reach back 7,000-8,000 years and two distinct domestication events, one in Mesoamerica and a second on the western slopes of the Andes Mountains of Peru. A member of the Legume family Fabaceae, beans form pods cradling nutrient dense high protein seeds. Meso and South American cultures prized these protein rich seeds that complimented and balanced their starchy tablemate's potatoes and corn (think a Meso-American version of soupbeans and cornbread). Beans continue to be the primary protein source for subsistence and subsistence-first farmers and communities in Mexico, Brazil and the Great Lakes region of eastern Africa including the countries of Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

Closer to home, beans are an important part of Johnson County's diet and culture. The former "Green Bean Capital of the World," Johnson County dominated snap bean production and marketing in the 1940's. Period literature notes Mountain City was an island in an 11,000 acre multi-state sea of beans all grown within a 50 mile radius of the town. Guess what your grandparents did on their summer break from school?!

At the table, large bowls of heirloom (and some newer) bean cultivars abound anchoring family meals, church dinners, and social events. Trading favorite varieties with colorful names, such as Vernie Ethel beans, Cutshorts, Greasy Beans, Turkey Crawl, Pink Tip, and Sulphur beans keeps garden green bean cultivation interesting while diversifying meal times. Individuals and families have their preferred varieties and good natured arguments over the "best" bean are frequent. If you haven't found a variety you enjoy keep looking. Seed Savers Exchange, an international network of seed collections based in Iowa, has over 4,000 varieties of beans in their collection and they're adding to it.

This summer take a few moments to consider the humble bean. Share a handful of seeds with a neighbor, shop the farmers market, and begin searching for heirloom varieties you'd like to try in your garden next year. Boiled down with a little bacon grease or fatback, steamed, dried as leather britches, or dried and eaten as soup beans, the humble bean is a cornerstone of regional foodways and history. Pick 'em, string 'em, break 'em, it's bean season in Johnson County.

