

There aren't many places in the country that have a more benign micro climate than the one we enjoy on the South coast. Sandwiched as we are between Southampton water to the East, the New Forest to the West and the Isle of Wight a few miles to the South of us, consequently this means we can sow early and benefit from a longer growing season. The downside is that we probably have to put up with more pests and diseases than the cooler parts of the British Isles. "There had to be a downside."



Never mind, with no more frosts forecast for our area, I started to plant out the more tender plants at the beginning of May, starting with the runner beans. The beans were sown in 3" square pots in mid March. Any potting compost will do. Pop the beans in 1" deep, I like to place them with the scar on the bean facing upper most. Start them off somewhere reasonably warm and within a week you should see signs of germination. They can stay in these pots until planting out time. The main requirement for the beans is a fertile moisture retentive soil, which is why I normally dig out a trench in the autumn and backfill with all the kitchen waste during the winter months. Sandwich the green compost between layers of top soil as you fill the trench. A week or so before planting out, rake the soil level and incorporate bone meal to assist root development, a good handful to each yard of trench is sufficient. 'I should remind you to wear gloves as bone meal is an animal by product.'

Things to avoid are using fresh manure or fertiliser containing too much nitrogen. Runner beans are able to extract their own nitrogen from the soil and store it in root nodules. Adding extra nitrogen to the soil will only result in abundant foliage with a poorer crop and twisted beans.

The beans are grown by a variety of methods. I prefer growing on cordons. This is a single row of bamboo canes with each bean growing straight up a cane. The base of each cane is inserted into a length of plastic pipe. This helps preserve the canes from rotting at the base. The cordon method needs good strong posts at each end of the row and additional posts every 8 feet if it is a long row. The advantage of this method is that the beans get good all round light exposure, plus the rainfall can get straight to the roots. 'Most exhibitors grow for show by this method.'

Another consideration is how windy is your site. Growing beans on a wigwam is easy to construct and very strong.

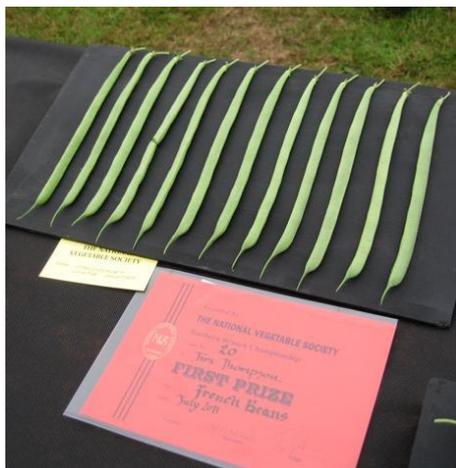


Another popular method is the 'A' frame. Two canes are pushed into the soil opposite each other then tied together at the top. Space each pair of canes about 15" apart. Then to strengthen and add rigidity to the row, place canes in the V at the top connecting all the uprights together.

Some people don't like to spend too much money on their allotments

On our allotment site the challenge is who can be the first to harvest their runner beans. We generally start picking around mid June when shop prices are extortionately high. During the year I make three successional sowings 6 weeks apart. This gives us beans right into November, 'if the frosts hold off.' Generally it is the lack of pollinating insects later in the year which causes production of beans to fall off. If you make your last sowing a bi coloured or white flowered variety you will have better success, as these have self pollinating abilities. Unlike Dwarf French beans there is no self fertile runner bean variety. 'Despite what some seed catalogues claim'. For my first two sowings I use the variety 'Stenner', this is a reselection of the red flowered bean 'Enorma' but much improved.

Talking of Dwarf French beans these are an excellent choice. They don't take up much space, they are self fertile and because of this they have a longer growing season than other types of bean. Also they are quick to crop. I grow my early ones under cover in my polytunnel. You could just as easily raise them in a conservatory or greenhouse. In good growing conditions you can harvest in eight weeks from sowing.



As you can see by the photo they can be grown in pots or direct in the ground. I usually give the plants some support to keep the beans off the ground. Sow on a monthly cycle for a continuous supply. My favourite variety is the flat podded bean called 'Prince'. Wonderful flavour and if you fancy entering a few in your local show it is a definite winner.

Another valuable member of the bean family is the broad bean. My first sowing is made in October using a frost hardy variety such as Aquadulce Claudia. Once again I raise these in 3" pots and when they are about 6" tall I plant them out under enviromesh.



Space the plants 6" apart. In the spring they will romp away. When they reach approximately 18" tall, pinch out the tops. This has a double benefit; first of all it initiates bean set and secondly it discourages the black fly.



Other beans certainly worth a try are Borlotti beans. These are fantastic in salads straight from the husks or dried and used through the winter months. There is still time to sow them out doors up until the end of June. The variety I prefer is Supremo. As well as drying the beans they apparently also freeze well.

The bean family is probably the most cost effective way of growing vegetables. They don't need any special conditions to get them going but they are always expensive to buy in the shops.

John Trim