

Nine Steps to Growing Pole Beans in the Northwest

by Gary Henderson¹



① SELECTING VARIETIES:

Select pole beans varieties from Northwest sources. Try Purple-podded Stringless for a bean that sprouts and grows well in our cool spring conditions, and Blue Lake that thrives during the summer growing season. Scarlett Runner beans also grow well in our climate, have attractive blooms, and are a fun plant for children, but the flavor is a disappointment to some.

② SOIL PREPARATION AND SITING:

Grow pole beans in deep, compost-rich soil. A foot or more of soil is best. A raised bed is recommended so that a higher soil temperature can be achieved earlier in the season. Pole beans can be grown in the same location each year. Rhizobial bacteria that form symbiotic nitrogen-fixing nodules in the roots of beans can accumulate in the soil and provide a benefit. Integrate fresh compost or a few handfuls of a slow-release organic fertilizer into the soil at this time.

③ SUCCESION PLANTING:

You can expect 3-5 weeks of production from a single planting of pole beans. Extend the season by warming the soil early and with succession planting. For an early crop, plant about 10 purple bean seeds in 8-inch clusters in single or double rows 18-24 inches apart in late April. Cover with a sheet of 6-mil black plastic, and secure the edges with rocks. After the seeds sprout (in 7-10 days), remove the plastic and replace with a row cover (such as Reemay). Remove the row cover when the plants have developed true leaves and the weather has warmed. The first harvest should begin in mid-to-late July. For a second crop, plant Blue Lake beans in mid-May, and expect the harvest to begin in

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early August. Seeds soaked overnight and indoors on a wet paper towel will sprout a day or two earlier.

④ **POLES AND OTHER SUPPORTS:**

Pole beans will grow to 10-15 feet if given sufficient support. Cedar stakes in 8-foot lengths work best, but can be hard to find. For home-made stakes, purchase straight-grained minimally knotted 1 x 6 or 1 x 8 cedar boards and rip into 1 x 1 stakes using a table saw. Position stakes vertically into the middle of each bean cluster and pound firmly into the ground. The growing space can be increased further by stapling coarse twine horizontally across to the tops of adjacent poles, or upward to the eaves of a house or to another structure. Pole beans will not adhere to smooth material like bamboo or plastic poles. Thin each cluster to 4 or 5 plants after the plants have begun to twine up the poles.

⑤ **GROWING SEASON MULCHES:**

Pole beans like evenly moist soil during the growing season. Consider spreading mulch between the poles to help obtain a more even watering over the season and to save on water as well. Wait until warm weather to add mulch. Try one of the following: coarse home-made compost; leaves and other plant trimmings shredded and collected with a lawn mower; newspaper sections folded and placed between the poles. Even if adequately watered, bean leaves often wilt in hot weather, but will regain firmness when the weather moderates.

⑥ **PEST CONTROL:**

Protect bean plants from slug damage using iron phosphate pellets, and use row covers to prevent towhees and other birds from up-rooting newly sprouted seedlings. Deer and rabbits love bean leaves and stems, so install a tall fence to deter deer and/or a short wire fence to keep out rabbits. Remove nearby bird feeders during the summer since English sparrows and other finches may feast on the bean flowers and on immature beanlets. Look for colonies of aphids under the leaves in summer, and control with a spray of insecticidal soap. Minimize powdery mildew by not allowing the leaves to get wet when watering, and by keeping good air circulation between the vines. Avoid structures, such as teepees, that direct the vines to grow together at the top, since this encourages mildew formation and is an invitation to aphids.

⑦ **THE HARVEST:**

Pick beans before seeds have started to form for best quality and pick completely to promote a longer growing season.

⑧ **SEED COLLECTION:**

Beans are rarely hybrids so seeds can be collected for the following season. Allow a few plants to set mature seed pods. Pick mature pods after they dry on the vine, or before, if bean growth is



halted by cool rainy weather. Mature green pods need to be dried indoors before mold damages the seeds.

⑨ **CLEAN-UP:**

Remove bean poles immediately after seed collection, wipe clean, and store for next year. Expensive cedar poles can be used up to 10 years with proper care. Pull up vines and examine for rhizobial nodules on the roots. Throw the bean vines on the grass, mow up with lawn mower, and scatter back onto the bean garden for next year. Use a commercial bean inoculant next year if nodules are absent.