

# COWPEA

Gardening tips provided by  
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

## Overview

Cowpea, *Vigna unguiculata*, is a warm season vegetable of the legume family and is related to lima beans, green beans, and lentils. Black-eyed peas, a type of cowpeas, play an important role in New Year's Day celebrations, especially in the southern United States. Eating black-eyed peas is a sign of humility and is supposed to bring good luck for the coming year. To guarantee good fortune, some people consume one black-eyed pea for each day of the year. The cowpea is a good source of dietary fiber and protein.

## Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of cowpeas available that differ in days till maturity, growth habit, and disease resistance, as well as other traits. Cowpeas have been grouped according to seed type and color. Groupings include black-eyed/purple-eyed (oblong cream seed with coloring around the hilum), brown-eyed (when cooked, immature seeds are brown), crowder (seeds are "crowded" in pod, producing a globular shape), cream (cream seeds), clay (brown kidney-shaped seeds, rarely grown), and white acre (usually brown kidney-shaped seeds with a blunt end). A few available varieties are:

### Black-eyed/purple-eyed

- California Black-eye (disease resistant)
- Pink-eye Purple Hull (pink-colored seeds)

### Cream

- Zipper Cream (easy to shell, cream seeds)

### Crowder

- Black Crowder (high yielder, easy to shell)
- Mississippi Silver (disease resistant)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

## Planting Tips

The cowpea is a warm season vegetable that performs poorly in cool weather.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in late May to mid-June after the soil has warmed and the threat of a frost has



passed. Seeds can be planted about 1 inch deep and 1-2 inches apart in the rows with 2-3 feet between rows. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can be found on the seed packet.

Poor or uneven germination can result from seeds being planted too deeply so that the emerging seedlings cannot break through the soil's surface. Soil crusting can occur after a heavy rain, especially if the topsoil contains clay. Soil crusting can be prevented by mulching the rows with sawdust, pine needles, or grass clippings.

## Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Legumes such as cowpeas are able to produce or "fix" their own nitrogen when the right soil microorganisms are present. If cowpeas have not been grown in the garden before, an inoculum (dried *Rhizobium* organism) can be sprinkled on the seeds or seedrow, otherwise the cowpeas may benefit from some nitrogen fertilizer. Cowpeas are fairly drought tolerant and cannot tolerate waterlogged soil.

The cowpea curculio can cause damage to cowpeas by feeding on seed pods and laying its eggs in the seeds of the cowpea. The cowpea curculio can be controlled with chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin (be sure to follow product labels). Aphids can also be a problem and can be controlled using insecticidal soaps.

Possible diseases include root-knot (caused by nematodes) and fusarium wilt (causes plants to yellow and die). To prevent these diseases, plant disease-resistant varieties, improve soil drainage with raised beds, and rotate legume plantings with other crops each year.

## Harvesting

Cowpeas can be harvested at 3 different stages, as snap beans, mature shelled cowpeas, or dry cowpeas. When the

Pods are young and tender, before the seeds fully form, they can be harvested to use like snap beans. Once the pods are plump and firm, the cowpeas can be harvested, shelled, and cooked. The plants will continue to produce more cowpeas if the mature pods are removed. For dried cowpeas, the seeds should be harvested once pods have lightened in color and have dried completely.

### **Seed Sources**

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) and R.H. Shumway's (1-800-342-9461, rhshumway.com) are two companies that sell cowpea varieties.

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