

Black-Eyed Peas, A Humble Legume with Great Potential

by Kay Bushnell

As summer wanes and crisp evenings foretell the coming of the cooler months there are still many opportunities for patio suppers and picnics. A hearty salad with crisp, colorful legumes and vegetables is easily portable and will better resist the spoilage that can occur with food that contains dairy products and meats. Beans of all kinds flourish in salads and hot dishes. Black-eyed peas are a versatile, attractive food for indoor and outdoor feasts.

Before arriving in America black-eyes traveled throughout the world. The bushy vine of black-eyed peas grows wild in Asia. The black-eyed pea was also a nutritious staple in Africa long before it was brought to the American south during the period of slavery. In the south to this day it is prepared in many delicious ways, especially on New Year's Day, when traditionally it appears in the dish, Hoppin' John, said to bring luck in the year to come.

Another name for black-eyed pea is "cow pea", which describes its longtime use as animal fodder. Lucky cows to consume such nourishing fare! Black eyed peas contain significant amounts of protein, potassium, folacin, calcium, magnesium, selenium, and fiber. They are almost fat-free and, like all foods from plants, are completely free of cholesterol. Black-eyed peas also enhance foods aesthetically with their striking black circular "eyes" at their inner curves.

If they are pre-soaked, dried black-eyed peas can be placed in a large cooking pot, then covered with water and cooked until tender in a mere 30 minutes. To reduce gas that can result from consuming black eyed peas or other legumes, cover them with water and soak for at least four hours or overnight. Then drain and cover them with fresh water; bring them to a boil, and simmer them until they are cooked. Crumbling a strip of kombu (sea vegetable) and tossing it in with the cooking beans can also make them less gassy. Black-eye peas are cooked when they retain their shape but can be mashed when pressed against the cooking pot with the back of a spoon.

Enhance your meals with salads, entrees, soups, and spreads that call for this attractive legume with great culinary potential.