

How to Grow Runner Beans (Phaseolus Coccineus)

Introduction:

Phaseolus Coccineus known as the Scarlet Runner Bean, the Runner Bean or the Multiflora Bean is a plant of the legume family Fabaceae. The runner bean originated in the tropical uplands of Central America. A perennial in its native land, the runner bean is a half-hardy annual in the UK as the plants are killed by the autumn frosts. It is believed that the runner bean was introduced into this country by John Tradescant, gardener to Charles I. Some of the old varieties are still widely grown. For example Painted Lady introduced in 1855 and the Scarlet Emperor in 1906. It is grown both as food as an ornamental plant.

Being members of the legume family, runner beans produce their own nitrogen although still needing additional fertiliser. Runners beans can be grown in a wigwam of canes, in a large container if fed with liquid tomato fertiliser and watered regularly or in the traditional bean trench. The reason for the trench being because runner beans are such thirsty plants.

Sowing Seeds Indoors.

By sowing indoors in April in deep pots you get better germination and an earlier crop of beans.

Sow seeds indoors in late spring - late April to early May. Choose pots 7-8cm (2.5-3inch) wide pots or root trainers. Fill with moist multi-purpose compost. Into the centre of each pot place one bean 5cm (2inch) deep. Water well and keep in a warm, bright place on a windowsill, in a propagator or in the greenhouse at a temperature of 12C (54F). Seedlings grow quickly and need regular watering. When plants are approximately 8cm (3inches) tall they are ready for planting outside. Ensure that plants are first hardened off and secondly that all danger of a late frost has passed.

Sowing seeds Outdoors.

Sow outdoors in early summer from late- May to early June.

Sow the seeds 5cm (2inches) deep, 2 beans at the base of each cane. When seedlings start to grow, thin to one seedling per plant, keeping the strongest seedling to grow on. Ensure protection from slugs and snails.

Planting in a wigwam.

Runner Beans thrive in a rich, deep fertile soil in full sun. Before planting it is best to improve the soil with organic matter the previous autumn. If this has not been possible it can be done 2 weeks beforehand to allow the ground to settle. In heavy, wet soil pre-warm the soil in early spring by covering in clear plastic or cloches 2 to 3 weeks beforehand.

Choose a sheltered spot where the dense shade cast by the plants will not be a problem. To build a wigwam push some 5 to 6 canes, approximately 2.4m (8foot) high, into the soil in a circle with the canes 22cm (9 inches) apart at the base. Tie the canes together at the top to form your wigwam.

Dig a hole at the base of the cane where your plant is to go. Firm the soil around each plant and water thoroughly. Protect your plants from slugs and snails.

Planting in a Bean Trench.

In winter dig a trench 20-30cm (8-12inches) deep and a spade's blade in width. Line your trench with cardboard or sheets of newspaper and begin to fill with kitchen waste, covering each layer with soil to prevent vermin. Continue to fill with kitchen waste until the trench is full. Top off with soil and leave to rot down. By planting time this will have reduced well and will help retain water over the growing season.

Make a double line of inwardly sloping and crossed canes tied at the top to a horizontal support. Canes in the rows should be 22cm (9inches) apart, with some 45cm (18inches) between the double row of canes. Ensure canes are pushed securely into the soil to a depth of at least 30cm (12inches).

In May - June plant your bean plants on top of the composting trench and their roots will go down into the moisture retentive soil boosting growth.

****Wherever you grow your runner beans it is important that you:**

- Pinch out the growing tip once the plants have reached the top of the canes - this encourages bushy growth.
- Water regularly and feed occasionally with liquid tomato fertiliser.

- In dry weather, spraying the plants with water will help your beans to set.

Harvesting.

Cropping starts about mid-summer depending on the variety sown and can continue for 8 weeks or more if harvested regularly. Pick your pods when young and tender and beans are about 15-20cm (6-8inches) long. Pods should then snap easily and the beans inside should still be small and pale in colour.

Ideally pods should be picked every 2-3 days to prevent pods from reaching maturity as once this happens plants stop flowering and no more pods will form. Don't let beans get tough and stringy altho you can leave some pods on the plant to ripen and use the ripe beans in stews and casseroles. Runner beans also freeze well and you can some to use as seeds for next year.

Pests and Remedies

- Runner Beans are fairly trouble free apart from young plants being at risk of slugs and snails. Remedy: Beer-traps; sawdust or eggshell barriers; copper tape; biocontrols.
- Black bean aphid, these cause stunting to leaves and stems and disfigure plants. Remedy: Catch populations when small and squash. Use organic sprays such as natural pyrethrum e.g Bug Clear Ultra or plants oils e.g Bug Clear Fruit and Veg as these can help control aphids,
- Very few or No beans. Cause is usually lack of water and or poor pollination. Remedy: Plant or sow beans into soil that has had plenty of organic matter such as well rotted manure added the previous autumn as this will aid moisture and nutrient retention around roots of plants. Plant in a sheltered site as this will encourage bees to visit and pollinate plants.
- Rust. A common fungal disease recognised by orange, yellow or black spots or blisters that form on leaves and contain the spores that will spread to other plants. The spread of this disease is often caused by wet weather conditions. Remedy: Thin out dense growth to reduce humidity. Pick off affected leaves as soon as symptoms appear and dispose of these as this should check the development of the disease. (Tend to develop on older leaves first). Dispose of all debris and fallen leaves at the end of the season as the blisters or pustules can survive on leaf debris over winter and ruin next season's crop.

Do not save seed from rust infected crops. There are no fungicides available to the home gardener for the control of bean rust.

Likes & Dislikes

Runner beans like being planted near carrots, cucumber, cabbage, lettuce, peas, parsley, cauliflower, spinach and summer savoury.

Runner beans do not like being planted near onions, garlic, fennel, gladioli, kohlrabi or sunflowers.

Growing for our Annual Show.

There are two classes for runner beans in our show; Class 15 five runner beans and Class 16 the longest runner bean, a common self explanatory class in most Shows..

Runner beans attract 18 pts; condition 5pts, uniformity 4pts, size 3pts, shape 4pts and colour 2pts. Uniform, well-ripened bulbs of good colour are best. Tips should be tied "whipped" with raffia to about 2 inches. Runner beans should be long, uniform, straight shapely fresh pods of good colour with stalks and no outward signs of seed. Major defects are considered as short pods that are misshapen with rough and damaged skin and when snapped are stringy, limp or show prominent seeds.

Refs: www.rhs-org.uk/vegetables/runnerbeans/grow-your-own

www.allotment-garden.org/vegetables/runnerbean-growing