

JACK AND THE BEAN STALK REVISITED:

POLE BEANS OR BUSH BEANS?



Illinois Extension
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Planting

In general, the seeds of both types can be sown after May 15. Expect to see beans after 50-60 days, slightly longer for pole beans. Beans are legumes like peas, soybeans, and the red bud tree. That means they have a special relationship with bacteria in their root systems that allows them to obtain or “fix” nitrogen from the air. When you buy bean seeds, you will likely encounter a recommendation on the seed packet to also buy the “inoculant,” or the bacteria that fix the nitrogen for the beans. This is like buying an insurance policy. It is very likely that your beans will grow just fine without the inoculant—the bacteria are likely already present in your soil. Buying the inoculant might give you a slight edge.

The seed packets will give plant spacing guidance. For bush beans, planting seeds 3’ apart, and then thinning to 12” spacing is a good rule of thumb. Why not just plant the seeds 12” apart? It is best not to assume that all the seeds you purchased will germinate. If most germinate, there is always an opportunity to offer extra plants to relatives or neighbors.

Should I grow bush beans, pole beans, or both? Let’s take a look at the differences and the advantages/disadvantages of each type.

If vegetable gardening is a new endeavor, staring at the large seed displays at various stores can be overwhelming. OK, I want to grow radishes, but which one? There could be 5-10 different types, each with its own characteristics. Even gardeners with some years of experience feel the trepidation when buying new varieties. Might as well just go for it!

Consider green beans. Before mentioning the numerous varieties, here is your first decision—bush-type or pole beans? Let’s take a closer look to see their characteristics and advantages/disadvantages.

GROWTH

Bush beans:

As the name suggests, these beans grow relatively close to the ground, reaching approximately 2’ in height, with a similar spread. These plants generally produce beans all at once (usually 2 weeks for the home gardener) making them ideal for commercial harvesting. If additional harvesting is desired through the summer, plantings should be staggered, one to three weeks apart, for example. Their well-defined growth pattern makes them a great choice for raised beds and large pots.

Pole beans:

These plants will reach for the sky. By trading height for width, they can be a good choice for limited space. Given a trellis, a set of vertical poles, or other vertical framework, they will climb all summer and keep producing until late fall.

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References

<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/veggies/beans.cfm>

<https://www.grow-it-organically.com/green-bean-varieties.html>

<https://garden.org/learn/articles/view/442/>



Pole vs Bush Beans Continued

Harvesting

Pick early and often. Picking stimulates new growth. If you leave beans on the vine too long, they get tougher and the beans inside the pod get larger as they head to dry bean status. I am in the pole bean camp due to garden layout. Under “Varieties” below, I suggest a couple of varieties that work for me. Each garden is different; and the fun is in the journey, so be sure to experiment with different varieties until you find a few favorites.

Pests/Diseases

There is definitely not enough time to cover plant pests and diseases in this summary. No need for despair! Simply focus on some sound gardening practices and things will be fine:

1. Try to find resistant varieties. Good seed suppliers will make a note of the disease resistance of plant varieties. Spending some time with online or good old paper seed catalogues can help. For several of the blight diseases, using resistant varieties is the only option.
2. Unless a plant is commonly found in the water or in a bog, the plant does not want to be wet all the time. Overwatering seedlings in spring when cool weather is still around can open the door for fungus. Water carefully—do not flood the plants and give them a few days before grabbing the hose again
3. Resist the urge to use the lawn sprinkler. Water plants on the ground, in the area where the stem meets the soil. Watering the vegetation above the ground just helps “spores/molds/fungi”.
4. If possible, relocate the beans to a different area of the garden every year or two.

Varieties

The local stores selling seed packets will have a limited number of varieties. Blue Lake 274, Bush Kentucky Wonder, Wax, and a few others will fill out the bush varieties. Pole bean varieties usually include Fortex and Kentucky Wonder (Pole bean).

An online visit to the sites of major seed suppliers will reveal many, many more varieties.

In my experience with pole beans, the clear winner is Trionfo Violetto. Why? This variety is prolific and provides a longer picking window by perhaps 2 days without losing its texture/taste profile. I like Fortex but taking a 3-4 day trip during prime fruiting season meant a lot of “old beans” when I returned.

Finally, do not overlook internet videos on growing beans—a wealth of great information.