

## RAINBOW BEANS

Boxed numbers in the text refer to these cultivars of climbing French beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*):

- 'Eva' **1**
- 'Golden Gate' **2**
- 'Cobra' **3**
- 'Rob Splash' **4**
- 'Limka' **5**
- 'Rob Roy' **6**
- 'Blauhilde' **7**
- 'Algarve' **8**
- 'Empress' **9**
- 'Borlotto Lingua Di Fuoco' (often sold as 'Firetongue') **10**



# A credit to the crunch

Despite poor weather, parallel trials at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey and East Ruston Old Vicarage in Norfolk in 2008 showed the diversity, attractiveness and productivity of tasty, crunchy, climbing French beans. This month is the ideal time to sow them, explains **Sue Stickland**. Photographs by Tim Sandall

**CLIMBING FRENCH BEANS** are less popular among UK gardeners than runner beans, but perhaps undeservedly so. They can give heavy crops of tasty beans, are easy to grow and relatively trouble free. Some cultivars have pods that are purple, yellow or splashed with red, making them eye catching in the vegetable garden, and compared to their bushy, dwarf counterparts, they are great value for the little space they take up.

Unlike their close relatives runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*), climbing French beans (*P. vulgaris*) do not rely on

insects for pollination, and their pod-set is less affected by heat (pod-setting in runner beans can be adversely affected both by cold snaps, when fewer pollinators are active, and warm nights). As they are self-fertile, French beans can produce good crops even in glasshouses or poly-tunnels. Both species are native to Central and South America and were introduced to Europe in the 16th century.

Most cultivars in the catalogues are bred for their pods, but some are grown mainly for their edible seeds: shelled and used fresh like broad beans these are

known as 'flageolets' or, when dried, as 'haricots'. However, the pods of these selections can also be picked and eaten when young and tender.

### Choosing a spot

Climbing French beans do best on a sunny site, and need shelter from strong winds as these can damage both plants and pods. Grow them on a patch that has had manure incorporated for the previous crop, or fork in garden compost or a bagged soil improver in spring.

They need supports such as wigwams of canes, or frameworks of poles and strings, or alternatively they can be allowed to twine decoratively over arches or up trellises. Supports should be about 1.8m (6ft) high, with 60cm (24in) across wigwams or between single rows of canes, and 15–20cm (6–8in) between plants.

French beans can suffer from several soil-borne diseases including anthracnose, halo blight and foot and root rots,

so should be rotated (moved to a different spot) from year to year. Ideally, avoid growing beans in the same place for at least four years.

### Sowing and planting

Although climbing French beans are frost tender, seeds can be sown directly outdoors once the soil has warmed up and all danger of frost has passed – mid to late May on warm sites. Sow two seeds 4–5cm (1½–2in) deep at the base of each cane and thin to the stronger seedling at each when they emerge.

However, direct-sown seeds easily rot in cold or wet soils, or may be eaten by mice. Raising plants in a glasshouse or on a windowsill can help avoid these problems, and also gives the crop a head start. Use 5–7cm (2–3in) pots and a well-drained multipurpose compost. If you sow about five weeks before the usual last-frost date in your area, you should have plants that are ready

to go out as soon as it is safe. Climbing French beans will usually crop for about six weeks (not as long as runners) so, in warm areas, it is worth extending the harvest by making a second sowing five to six weeks after the first.

Whether you are sowing direct or planting out, take precautions against slugs, as they find tender young French beans a delicacy.

Young transplants should be watered if necessary until established, and their first shoots may need help to twist around supports, but after this the plants need little care. When flowers and pods start to form, keep them moist at the roots with a weekly ►



# 'ALTHOUGH PURPLE PODS TURN DARK GREEN WHEN COOKED, YELLOW ONES KEEP THEIR LIVELY COLOUR, AND A MIXED SERVING OF YELLOW AND GREEN BEANS LOOKS PARTICULARLY ATTRACTIVE'

watering in dry spells. French beans are generally trouble free, although blackfly, red spider mite and sclerotinia disease can sometimes cause problems (see RHS Advice, p350).

From early sowings, climbing French beans can start cropping around the middle to end of July, depending on the weather conditions. Harvest pods as soon as they are large enough, before they start to bulge with seeds or become fibrous. If unsure, try breaking one in two – it should snap cleanly. Continue to pick regularly (every few days in the height of summer) as this encourages plants to carry on cropping, and be sure to remove and compost any pods that are past their best.

## French beans on trial

Last year's cool, wet summer was a testing one for climbing French beans,

but 31 cultivars were successfully trialed at RHS Garden Wisley in Surrey and East Ruston Old Vicarage Garden, Norfolk. They were a mix of established garden cultivars and newly introduced ones, and exhibited a wide range of pod types (round to flat) and colours. Coloured-podded cultivars were also grown at RHS Garden Rosemoor in Devon.

The beans were picked regularly, their weights recorded, and the cultivars at Wisley were judged for yield, earliness and on the taste and quality of the pods (colour, tenderness, smoothness, uniformity and stringiness). Performance at the other sites was similar. Subject to availability, 11 cultivars were recommended for an Award of Garden Merit (AGM; see box, p333).

All French beans are frost-sensitive, but some cope better in cool conditions than others and start cropping earlier. In the trial, 'Eva' 1 (green oval pods) and 'Kwintus' (flat pods) were the first to be harvestable. Golden-podded cultivars are often said to be slower to crop than green ones, and this was confirmed in the trial.

Most of the cultivars receiving an AGM have broad, flat pods. These are popular with commercial growers as early, high-yielding substitutes for runner beans – they look similar, and can be sliced in the same way. These cultivars gave heavy crops, the highest-yielding being 'Musica' and 'Pantheon' (producing on average more than 950g/2lb per plant), although the older cultivars 'Hunter' and 'Algarve' still did well. 'Limka' 5 gave consistently high yields of good-quality, flavoursome pods. For gardeners that prefer the round, 'pencil-podded' cultivars, 'Cobra' 3 gave reliably high yields of sweet-flavoured beans.

## Ornamental pods

Coloured-podded cultivars did less well in the trials, although they can still give worthwhile crops and are most ornamental. They might have done better in a warmer summer. Purple cultivars such as 'Blauhilde' 7 and 'Empress' 9, for example, develop their best colour when exposed to sunlight (distinctly lacking for much of the 2008 summer), but their dark-tinted foliage is also

attractive. In ornamental kitchen gardens and potagers it may be worth accepting slightly lower yields for the ornamental value of cultivars with coloured pods.

Flat, yellow-podded 'Golden Gate' 2 was the only coloured cultivar to receive an AGM, but other yellow types are available. Naturally curled 'Anellino Giallo' is traditionally used for making cooked-and-cold bean salads in Italy and it performed reasonably well. Although purple pods turn dark green when cooked, yellow ones keep their lively colour – a mixed serving of yellow and green beans looks particularly attractive.

## Taste and texture

French beans vary less in taste than many other vegetables, but nevertheless some may be sweeter than others or have a stronger 'beany' flavour. 'Golden Gate', 'Cobra' and 'Pantheon' were noted for their sweetness by the RHS Vegetable Trials Sub-Committee.

Texture is also important, and most modern cultivars bred for their pods remain tender even when the pods grow relatively large; the fleshy flat-podded cultivars are sometimes described as 'melting in the mouth'. The pods of cultivars grown primarily for flageolets or haricots (such as 'borlotti' beans with red-splashed pods) may be quicker to develop fibrous strings and parchment, although the young cooked pods can still be tender and tasty.

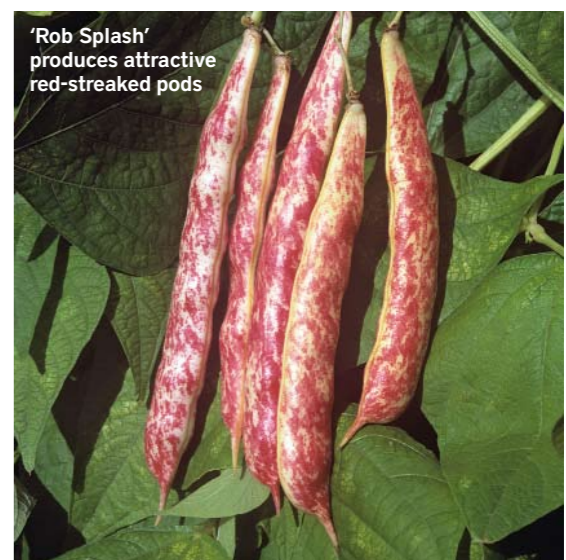
Climbing French beans can be an easy, worthwhile crop for gardens and allotments and, as this trial shows, there is a wide choice of cultivars with different qualities. Together they can provide high, early yields and an attractive mixture of colours, both in the garden and on the plate. ■

Sue Stickland is a garden writer with a special interest in vegetable growing

@ For more on growing climbing and dwarf French beans, as well as links to the trial report, visit RHS Online at: [www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown/frenchbeans.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown/frenchbeans.asp)  
● For detailed lists of AGM plants, including fruit and vegetables together with suppliers, visit: [www.rhs.org.uk/plants/award\\_plants.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/award_plants.asp)



Round-podded French beans are the classic *haricots verts* so prized by cooks



## FRENCH BEAN AWARDS

These climbing French bean cultivars received an AGM in the 2008 trials at Wisley and East Ruston:

- 1 'Eva' (AGM 1993 reconfirmed)
- 2 'Golden Gate'
- 3 'Cobra' (AGM 2000 reconfirmed)
- 5 'Limka'
- 8 'Algarve' (AGM 1993 reconfirmed)
- 11 'Hunter' (AGM 1993 reconfirmed)
- 12 'Kwintus' (AGM 1993 reconfirmed)
- 13 'Musica' (AGM 1993 reconfirmed)
- 14 'Pantheon'
- BB2515 (subject to naming and availability)
- BB2517 (subject to naming and availability)

## SEED SUPPLIERS

The following supply AGM cultivars and other climbing French beans mentioned in the text:

- Dobies 0844 701 7625 [www.dobies.co.uk](http://www.dobies.co.uk) 2 8
- Mr Fothergill's 0845 3710518 [www.mr-fothergills.co.uk](http://www.mr-fothergills.co.uk) 3 11 14 'Anellino Giallo'
- Kings 01376 570000 [www.kingsseeds.com](http://www.kingsseeds.com) 3 7 11
- Marshalls 01480 443390 [www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk](http://www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk) 8 9
- Moles Seeds 01206 213213 [www.molesseeds.co.uk](http://www.molesseeds.co.uk) 1 3 5 8 11 12
- Organic Gardening Catalogue 0845 130 1304 [www.organiccatalogue.com](http://www.organiccatalogue.com) 1 7
- Seeds-by-Size 01442 251458 [www.seeds-by-size.co.uk](http://www.seeds-by-size.co.uk) 3 5 8 13
- Seeds of Italy 020 8427 5020 [www.seedsofitaly.com](http://www.seedsofitaly.com) 'Anellino Giallo'
- Suttons 0844 922 0606 [www.suttons.co.uk](http://www.suttons.co.uk) 3 5
- Thomson & Morgan 01473 695225 [www.thompson-morgan.com](http://www.thompson-morgan.com) 3 7



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