

Fava Beans Growing Guide

Valued for their rich, earthy flavor and creamy texture, protein-rich fava beans (*Vicia faba*) have been an important source of sustenance in diverse cultures throughout history, and they continue to be a staple food in regions across the globe, notably in African, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean countries.



Fava beans can be a good choice for youth gardens for many reasons, including:

- The plants are adaptable, resilient, easy to grow, and relatively pest-free.
- They prefer the cool temperatures of spring and fall, in contrast to heat-loving beans.
- The seeds are large and easy for young kids to handle and sow.
- They offer abundant opportunities for lessons in science and history as well as for cross-cultural connections.
- In addition to the beans, other parts of the fava plant are edible, including the leaves and flowers. See caution note below.*

Fava beans have been grown for millennia and have one of the longest histories of cultivation of any edible crop, with researchers estimating that domestication of the plant began some 10,000 years ago. With a legacy dating back to prehistoric times, the plant's wild ancestors and native regions aren't known for sure; the plant is commonly listed as native to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and/or the region now known as the Fertile Crescent.

A member of the legume family, the fava bean plant, like most of its kin, forms an association with nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the soil, allowing it to convert atmospheric nitrogen into a form that is available to the plant. The plant uses some of this nitrogen to synthesize proteins, making fava beans both a good source of dietary protein and a nitrogen-rich cover crop to improve soil fertility.

***Caution note:** For people with relatively rare inherited disorder called G6PD deficiency, consuming fava beans can cause an illness called favism that can lead to anemia. It pays to be cautious: When trying fava beans for the first time, start by eating a few and then wait and watch for symptoms. Learn more: <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/g6pd-glucose6phosphate-dehydrogenase-deficiency>

Fava Facts

- Botanically speaking, fava beans are a type of vetch (*Vicia* spp.), and they're currently the only vetch commonly grown for human consumption. (Most types of vetch are cultivated for use as forage by livestock.)
- Some varieties of *Vicia faba* produce large, flat beans that are harvested young and eaten fresh. In Europe these are commonly called broad beans or Windsor beans; the term fava bean is used for varieties that produce smaller beans that are left to fully mature and dry on the plant. In the U.S., however, the names fava bean and broad bean are often used interchangeably.
- Fava beans have been an important source of sustenance, especially protein, in diverse cultures throughout history, and they continue to be a staple food in many regions, notably in

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African, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean countries. And like other ancient and vital food sources, fava beans have deep cultural connections and symbolic meanings.

- *Ful medames* (also known as *foul mudammas* or simply *fūl*) is a simple dish made from dried fava beans that have been stewed until soft and then seasoned with garlic, cumin, and other spices. Sometimes the beans are left whole, sometimes mashed. A national dish of Egypt (and sometimes referred to as Egyptian fava beans), its origins date back to ancient times. Similar preparations are popular in regions throughout the Middle East and Africa. Fava beans are reported to have been found in Egyptian tombs!
- Once a popular crop in colonial-era gardens, the fava bean fell out of favor in the U.S. by the mid-1800s, replaced by the more heat-tolerant lima bean. Fava beans are regaining some of that popularity as food enthusiasts discover their unique taste and gain an appreciation for their place in global cuisines.

How to Grow

Fava bean is a cool-season annual that will produce a crop in conditions where heat-loving types of beans struggle. The plants grow best when temperatures are in the 60s; daytime temperatures higher than the mid-70s may result in poor yield.

In cold-winter climates, plant them in very early spring, about the same time as you'd plant peas. Young fava plants can withstand hard frosts. You can also plant them in late summer for a fall harvest.

In climates with mild winters where the ground does not freeze, sow seeds in autumn. Plants will sprout and establish strong root systems over the winter and then grow vigorously in spring.

Choosing varieties

Fava beans are sometimes divided into groups, with *Vicia faba* var. *major* denoting large-seeded beans favored for cookery. (In contrast, *V. faba* var. *equina* denotes the type commonly grown as forage; steer clear of these, well as fava bean varieties sold as cover crops — they produce small, tough seeds.)

There are just a handful of commonly available varieties of fava beans. Most will take 70 – 100 days to reach harvest stage for fresh eating, and up to 150 days to reach the state where they're fully mature and dry.

Most varieties grow about 4' tall and benefit from some type of support to keep plants upright. Dwarf varieties are more compact and are ideal for windy spots.

Selecting a site

Fava beans require full sun and well-drained soil with moderate fertility. (Overly rich soils and excess nitrogen leads to poor yield and toppled plants.) Because they grow into bushy, multi-stemmed plants, they need some elbow room in the garden to avoid overcrowding. Loosen soil to a depth of 8" to 10" and amend it with compost. Fava beans are well-suited to growing in raised beds and containers.

Sowing seeds

Fava beans will germinate in soils as cool as 42° F, so plant them in early spring as soon as the soil has dried enough to be worked. Plant seeds 1" to 2" deep and 4" to 6" apart, thinning to 8" to 12" apart. Install your support system, if using, at planting time to avoid disturbing roots. Seeds can take up to three weeks to germinate.

Care

Water as needed to keep soil moist. Avoid over-watering; mature plants are relatively drought tolerant. Watch for the development of seed

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Pods, which will start forming low on the stems. At this point, you can pinch back the plants by cutting off the growing tips and first few leaves of each stem; this will encourage the plant to direct its energy into development of the seeds. Don't toss the trimmings; they're edible and can be eaten raw or steamed like other leaf vegetables. When the weather heats up, flowers will begin to drop, and pod production will slow. Depending on the climate and conditions, growth may resume when the weather cools.

Harvest

Fava beans can be harvested in numerous ways. You can begin harvesting small pods when they're 2" to 3" long and eat them, pod and all. Or you can wait until the pods are filled out with plump seeds (usually when they're 4" to 8" long, depending on the variety). Remove the seeds from the tough pods and eat as you would fresh lima beans. For dried fava beans, wait to harvest until the pods dry and shrivel and the beans inside are thoroughly dry.

Tips

- Soak seeds for 24 hours prior to planting to speed germination.
- Two pounds of fava bean pods will yield about a cup of shelled beans.
- Be sure to compost the nitrogen-rich crop residues or simply leave the roots in the soil, where they will add nitrogen to the soil as they decompose.

Enjoying Your Harvest

Harvest small, tender pods (generally 2" to 3" long, with seeds less than 1/2" long) and eat them as you would green beans, pod and all. Enjoy them raw, steamed, grilled, or seared in a skillet. Or open the pod and remove the seeds (aka "shelling" them) and enjoy the small seeds raw or steamed.

For older, larger pods (generally 4" to 8" long), remove the seeds and cook them by steaming or boiling them until they're tender. The taste is similar to lima beans, but creamier and butterier.

Note: Some fava beans benefit from having the outer seed coat (skin) removed prior to eating. Whether this is necessary depends on the variety, size of the seed, and toughness of the skin. If peeling is necessary, remove the seeds from the pods, blanch them in boiling water for 30 seconds, then immediately place them in an ice water bath. The skins should easily slip off. Then proceed to steaming or boiling (or freezing for future use).

Fresh fava beans can be fried for a savory, crunchy treat: Parboil the seeds for two minutes and then spread them out and allow them to dry. (There's no need to remove the seed coat; it will add flavor and crunch to the finished product.) Once they're thoroughly dry — this is important to prevent oil from splattering! — deep-fry them for several minutes until cooked through and crispy. Drain on a paper towel and season with salt and, if desired, dried herbs and spices.

Dried fava beans can be prepared as you would other large, dried beans, such as kidney beans. Depending on the type and the dish you're preparing, they may benefit from having the seed coat removed.

Fava beans can also be consumed as "bean sprouts," though, unlike some sprouts, they will need to be cooked before eating them. Soak the beans in water overnight. Drain them and place the moist beans in a jar, rinsing a few times a day. After a 3-4 days, you'll begin to see the tiny roots and shoots emerging. You can then cook them, such as by steaming or blanching, or cooking in a stew or other braising liquid until tender.

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