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Learn how to grow pulses in your garden

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

It’s hard to imagine a food garden without plants in the legume family (also known as Fabaceae) with their beautiful fairylike blossoms and bright green leaf structures.

Question: I would like to add some new plants to my food garden this year and heard pulses are a great option. I’m familiar with beans, but not other types. Do you have advice for growing other types of pulses?

Answer: Sure. Let’s discuss what pulses are and offer a few suggestions for your garden.

It’s hard to imagine a food garden without plants in the legume family (Fabaceae) with their beautiful fairylike blossoms, elongated fruit and bright green leaf structures.

Whether they’re cool season peas, warm season green beans, drying legumes on bushes and vines in fall or overwintering cover crops, legumes can play a role in the health and production of our food gardens.

Edible legumes cover a large array of crops which include peanuts, soybeans, peas and green beans.

Pulses are the dried edible seeds of legumes. They are one of the earliest cultivated crops, showing up in archaeological digs dating back 11,000 years. Historical records show street vendors selling pea soup in the streets of Athens as early as 400 BC.

The word “pulse” is believed to have come from the Middle English language (c.1150 to c.1470) and meaning a thick soup.

Overall, pulses are affordable, culturally adaptable and easy to grow with minimal space and water.

Leguminous crops like pulses are good for the soil because of their mutual relationship with rhizobia bacteria. The bacteria draws nitrogen from the air and shares it with the pulse plant. In return, the plants provide little “homes” (root nodules) for the bacteria, feeding it sugars and nutrients through photosynthesis.

When pulses are grown in a rotation before other crops there is a limited need for synthetically produced fertilizers, which through their manufacturing process and environmental impacts are known contributors to climate change. Crop rotations also help break up cycles of pests.

Dried beans — also called shell beans — are a common pulse grown in home gardens. Colors, shapes and sizes vary widely. Black, red kidney and white cannellini beans are a few types. Specialty types such as ‘Jacob's Cattle’ and ‘Petaluma Gold Rush’ beans can make an interesting addition to your garden. ‘Scarlet Runner’ beans attract pollinators with their red blossoms. ‘Tepary’ beans (Phaseolus actufolius) are small but drought tolerant.

Beans grow as bushes, about 2 to 3 feet tall and wide, or climbing vines which need a sturdy structure. Plant seeds in full sun and soil rich in organic matter. Keep soil moist but not so wet as to encourage water borne diseases.

They grow best in temperatures ranging from 60 to 85 degrees and can be planted once the chance of frost has passed. Plant bean seeds 1 to 1 ½ inches deep (depending on their size). Harvest periods range from 70 to 120 days. Space plants about 3 to 4 inches for bush types and 4 to 6 inches for pole varieties.

Allow beans to dry on the plant. Beans can be harvested and dried once they are fully formed and starting to brown and shrivel. While beans are warm weather plants, peas

prefer cool weather. Plant these in time for a fall or late spring crop. As with beans, peas can be bush or pole types with similar spacing and planting depths.

While dried beans, peas and chickpeas are widely grown in the United States, lentils are mainly grown and produced in Canada, along with a few states such as Washington and Idaho.

The lens-shaped seed grows two to a pod. Lentils prefer cooler spring weather and are an interesting, easy crop to try in your garden. Chickpeas can be grown in the same season as lentils.

Buy seeds specifically for the garden to avoid pesticides or chemicals that may prevent growth. The University of California is conducting studies in the Central Valley of California on lentils as a sustainable cover crop.

For more information about beans and pulses go to:
tinyurl.com/y738k54f
tinyurl.com/k969akke

Contributors to this week's column were Sue Lovelace, Lisa Howard and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.