



Cooperative Extension Service

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Beans

Beans and other legumes have long been a dietary staple for many cultures—dating as far back as 20,000 years! These ancient cultures knew that beans were easily cultivated and sustained life. In today's terminology this translates to cheap, good food. So for those of you trying to stretch your food dollar, make sure not to overlook the value and versatility of the bean.

All beans can be considered relatively inexpensive sources of nutrients. However, when cost is a primary concern, dry beans are unquestionably the way to go. At ~25 cents/cup (cooked and drained), they are less than half the price of their canned counterparts. In addition, dry beans do not have the added salt and preservatives necessary to maintain freshness and quality of canned beans.

Unfortunately, what you gain in price, you lose in convenience. Most dry beans must be soaked for 6-8 hours or overnight to 'rehydrate' before cooking. In addition, cooking can take 30 minutes to two hours. However, this time can be shortened by quickly boiling the beans first (before soaking) or by cooking with a pressure cooker. To avoid soaking altogether simply choose lentils, split peas, or black-eyed peas as they do not require a soak before cooking. And remember that dry beans may triple in size during the soaking process, so measure carefully!

Whether canned or dry, beans are nutritional gold. They are good sources of carbohydrates, fiber, and protein and low in fat and sodium. In addition, beans contain a multitude of vitamins and minerals, including calcium, potassium, iron, and many of the B-vitamins. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends eating about 3 cups of legumes per week for health. As with any fiber-rich food, beans should be slowly introduced in the diet, and accompanied by increased fluid intake. This will help to limit potential gastrointestinal side effects.

A few bean tips:

1. Dry beans should be rinsed and inspected before cooking—damaged beans should be removed
2. Drain the soak-water and rinse beans before cooking to minimize intestinal side effects
3. Wait until beans are tender to add salt or acidic ingredients like vinegar or tomato products
4. Soaking and cooking times may vary based on elevation, as well as the bean type and age
5. Dry beans may be stored in sealed container for at least 12 months. Slightly longer storage should not affect quality, but may lengthen cooking time.

Beans are great for the winter season as they lend themselves well towards soups, stews and many other hot dishes. Put them in the crock pot before you head to work and dinner will be waiting when you get home! *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*