

Spotlight on Legumes



The United Nations declared 2016 to be the International Year of the Pulses. Pulses, also called legumes, are a group of starchy beans, peas, and lentils. They are often overlooked and undervalued in the food supply.

This year in the spotlight shows that the humble bean is an affordable, nutritious, and earth-friendly choice for people across the world. Although 2016 is winding down, there is no reason to stop including these versatile foods in our diet each week. Let's take a look at some of the many reasons legumes are superstars.

They're good for our health

Legumes are packed with both soluble and insoluble **fiber**. One ½ cup serving of beans provides 8 grams of fiber. Soluble fiber has been shown to reduce cholesterol levels, which in turn lowers the risk of heart disease. Soluble fiber also aids in a feeling of fullness at meals, which may lead us to eat smaller portions. The fiber in beans can also help with blood sugar control by slowing digestion and absorption of sugars. The insoluble fiber found in legumes plays a role in digestive regularity.

We also rely on legumes as a plant-based **protein** source, providing 6-8 grams per ½ cup. At the same time, they are very low in saturated fat, unlike many animal proteins. For those following a plant-based diet, legumes are crucial to help meet their protein needs.



We can't ignore the many other nutrients that legumes provide. We take in **iron**, **folate**, **magnesium**, **calcium**, and **potassium** every time we eat beans or lentils.

One thing to remember is that iron from plant sources can be harder to absorb than iron from meats. By including a source of **vitamin C** with your beans, you can help to increase your absorption. One way to achieve this is by adding lemon juice to a bean soup or stew. Or you could use several vegetables that contain vitamin C in your cooking, such as bell peppers, tomatoes, and spinach.

Legumes are multicultural

Many different types of beans, peas, and lentils are consumed all over the world. They appear in Mediterranean dishes, including falafel, hummus, and mujaddara. In Asian cultures edamame, adzuki beans, and dal are common. Many African countries use fava beans and a variety of lentils. In Central and South America, black beans, kidney beans, and pinto beans appear often in slowly simmered soups and stews. Luckily, these recipes and ingredients are now widely available, so even here in Pennsylvania we can taste some new and interesting flavors.

Legumes are versatile

Many wonderful recipes exist that feature legumes in their whole form, from soups to veggie burgers and beyond. They are also being used in more creative ways. Did you know that chickpea flour can be used to make a high protein flatbread, or that it can be made into a "scramble" for those who do not eat eggs? Beans have also found a new role in baked goods, such as black bean brownies, by using pureed beans in place of white flour.

Legumes are appearing in new products, such as chickpea pasta, lentil crackers, and navy bean tortilla chips. Many companies are realizing that beans may be a secret to a healthier product!

Legumes are affordable

Most of us are looking for ways to save money on our groceries. Choosing more meatless meals each week is an easy way to trim the bill. Meat and poultry often cost over \$3-4 per pound, while a pound of dried beans averages \$1.35. When cooked, that pound of beans would make twelve ½ cup servings, while a pound of chicken may only serve four.

Growing legumes is easy on the environment

It takes less water to grow legumes than what is used to raise animal protein sources. For example, it takes 43 times more water to raise a pound of beef than it does to produce a pound of legumes. Many countries are developing more drought tolerant legume crops as well. Farmers use legumes as part of their crop rotation to keep their soil fertile. Legumes also require less fertilizer than many other crops, because they can draw nitrogen from the air.



Make beans a part of your holiday season

Many of us have holiday traditions that involve food, and New Year's Day in the USA is no exception. While some of us may prepare a slow cooker filled with pork and sauerkraut, many others make a dish called Hoppin' John. Eating Hoppin' John on New Year's Day is said to bring wealth or prosperity in the new year, with black eyed peas representing coins and collard greens symbolizing paper money. The following recipe is a healthy take on traditional Hoppin' John using boneless pork chops instead of a smoked ham hock.

Black-Eyed Peas with Pork & Greens

Adapted from eatingwell.com

Makes 6 servings

- 1 pound boneless pork chops, trimmed, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ½ teaspoon salt, divided
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 cup instant brown rice
- 8 cups roughly chopped collard greens, (about 1 small bunch), tough stems removed
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 14-ounce can reduced sodium chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar or sherry vinegar
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika, preferably hot
- 1 15-ounce can black-eyed peas, rinsed

Directions

1. Toss pork with ¼ teaspoon salt and pepper. Heat oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the pork and cook, stirring, until just cooked through, 4 to 6 minutes. Transfer to a bowl with a slotted spoon.
2. Add onion, tomato paste and rice to the pan and cook until the onion softens, about 4 minutes. Add greens and garlic and cook until the greens begin to wilt, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in broth, vinegar, paprika and the remaining ¼ teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat and simmer until the rice is done, 15 to 20 minutes. Stir in the reserved pork and black-eyed peas and heat for 1 minute.

Broaden your horizons

The year of pulses may be coming to a close, but that doesn't mean we should stop eating all types of beans, lentils, and peas! In fact, the celebrations will continue with the second annual Global Pulse Day, January 18, 2017. Hopefully your mind is churning with ways you can add more beans to your diet. For more inspiration, check out the recipe collection here:

<http://www.fao.org/pulses-2016/recipes/en/>

Need a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are here to help you with your nutrition questions. To make an appointment call 412.692.4497 (Oakland location) or 412.623.2421 (Shadyside location).