

### *Vicia faba*

[Synonyms : *Faba bona*, *Faba faba*, *Faba major*, *Faba minor*, *Faba sativa*, *Faba vulgaris*, *Orobus faba*, *Vicia equina*, *Vicia esculenta*, *Vicia vulgaris*]

**BROAD BEAN** is a hybrid annual. From southern Europe it has small fragrant, pea-like, black-blotched, white flowers.

It is also known as *Ackerbohne* (German), *Bagha-lah* (Persian), *Bajilla* (Arabic), *Bakla* (Hindi), *Bob obecny* (Czech), *Bob obyčajny* (Slovak), *Bondböna* (Swedish), *Buffbohnen* (German), *Dicke Bohne* (German), English bean, Faba bean, *Faïve* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Fava* (Italian, Portuguese), Fava bean, *Faveira* (Portuguese), *Fève* (French), *Fève de marais* (French), Field bean, *Fula* (Maltese), *Haba* (Spanish), *Härkäpapu* (Finnish), Horse bean, *Pferdebohne* (German), Round bean, *Saubohne* (German), Small bean, Tick bean, *Tsan tau* (Chinese), and Windsor bean - in the different varieties.

Warning – excessive consumption of broad beans or inhalation of pollen can cause pallor, fever, shivering and delirium. Inadequately cooked seeds (beans) can cause poisoning. Symptoms can include headaches, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, fever, jaundice, anaemia and death. They can also be poisonous for animals.

*Faba* is a Latin name for ‘broad bean’.

The broad bean (and other varieties) which has been eaten since prehistoric times has been discovered by archaeologists in different forms in digs as far ranging as Thailand, the Near East, Mexico and northern Europe. Two types (both understood to be enhancements of local species) were being grown by at least 7000 BC by the peoples who lived in the ‘Cave of the Spirit’ in north-eastern Thailand. Remains of other forms a few thousand years younger have been found in the Near East and in the Mexican cave of Taumalipas on the other side of the world. It also seems that broad bean plants began to be cultivated in China from some time after 3000 BC. Yet more small-seeded forms have been found on Iron Age sites (500-51 BC) in Europe including in Britain, and for Europe it was the Continent’s most important bean until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Broad beans seem to have had a split personality. On the one hand ancient Egyptian culture is thought to have held them in some respect as their name for the place where the souls of the dead awaited reincarnation was ‘the beanfield’ and on the other hand the beans were considered to be unclean. The bean also attracted contradictory regard from ancient Greeks and Romans both of whom associated it with bad luck (even death) and excluded it from their religious ritual – so much so that Greek priests would neither eat them nor look at them and the Roman priests of Jupiter were forbidden from either touching or mentioning broad beans. Both Greeks and Romans were convinced also that these beans could disturb vision. Yet it not only provided food generally (not least at funeral feasts) but its seeds were used in Roman elections as counters (a practice which continued in many western European countries for hundreds of years) and anybody being told to abstain from beans

was being advised to keep out of politics. The Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras (6<sup>th</sup> Century BC) was a vegetarian and maintained ritual rules of abstinence that included ‘do not eat beans’. When he suffered persecution later in his life, his bean aversion had become so great that it was said that he would rather be captured and die

than flee across a beanfield if this was the only means of escape. His followers (in the community he established for part of his life in Crotona in southern Italy) also refrained from eating beans as according to Pythagorean philosophy it would have been equivalent to consuming one's parents and would have broken the cycle of reincarnation. (In contrast again in some countries broad beans have assumed a role in marriage ceremonies in which each bean in an offering represented a male offspring who would host an ancestor returning to cherish the family line.)

Broad beans attracted various beliefs and customs. One of the Roman traditions required the head of the household to spit beans in a ritual ceremony on 3 days of the year to expel evil spirits from his home. In the Middle Ages in England this tradition is said to have translated into the custom of spitting a mouthful of beans into a witch's face to neutralize her powers. It was also believed by some that the souls of the dead lived in the flowers. For others the flowers' strong scent was believed to cause madness, terrifying visions and bad dreams, and in the English Midlands and the North coalminers came to associate mining accidents with the period when the beans are in flower.

For centuries the broad bean has symbolized the embryo and growth. This is reflected in an English Twelfth Night (6<sup>th</sup> January) custom when a cake is served containing a bean – although today the bean can often be replaced by a small china doll or fish. Then on Candlemas Day (2<sup>nd</sup> February) broad beans were planted and candles and candlesticks were dispensed with until All Saints' Day (1<sup>st</sup> November) – all of which was encapsulated in the saying

Candlemas Day, put beans in the clay;  
Put candles and candlesticks away.

Variations on this theme occurred in different areas. One from Wiltshire favoured the first two days of March for planting –

Sow peas and beans on David and Chad  
Whether the weather be good or bad.

and some people believed that only one plant grew from every four bean seeds planted.

One for rook, One for crow, One to rot, One to grow.

In some regions in Europe the scent of the blossom has been extolled as an aphrodisiac – but it may of course be coincidental that by then Spring is in the air.

On the anniversary of a death in Italy (even as recently as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century) beans were distributed amongst the poor. And in the Jewish religion the rabbi has been forbidden to eat beans on the Day of Atonement.

During European famines (which could last three or four years) when there was a shortage of cereals bread would be made from pulses (including the broad bean) or from acorns (*Quercus*) and that made from the beans was usually rank. The 9<sup>th</sup> Century was infamous for these epidemics (Europe was hit 20 times in that Century alone) and bean bread was resorted to on each occasion until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century. (Authorities do point out however that broad bean flour is actually extremely nourishing as it has a high protein and vitamin content whether used on its own or with other flours.)

Some authorities note that broad beans rival soya bean (*Glycine max*) in importance in China today. They are also cultivated in some African countries and in both North and South America – in the latter particularly in regions where kidney beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) native to that Continent do not thrive.

The plant has also been grown as a fodder crop for both cattle and horses – and today it is also cultivated as a green manure.

Although the North American Navajo Indians appreciated the plant's negative qualities they added crushed leaves to tobacco mixtures and used the plant during some of their ceremonial ritual.

Some of the Keresan Indians cultivated broad bean as a vegetable.

The broad bean is connected with an illness to which only the male population of

Mediterranean origin (due it is now thought to an inherited biochemical abnormality) are understood to be susceptible. It is known as favism and can be caused by inhaling the pollen or by eating uncooked or inadequately cooked broad beans.

Medicinally, in Europe the past the soft inside of the pods of broad beans was rubbed on warts to cure them.