

Air is 79% nitrogen. As a farmer, this makes me happy. Plant growth requires a lot of nitrogen and I don't want to buy it. So we grow beans.

In mid-May I make furrows about two inches deep in a well-composted garden spot. We drop a couple of beans from last year's garden every foot,, and then step on them to firm the seed into the earth. Dry soil is raked over top and in a few days they are up and running.

Beans are the legume family, which loves calcium. I lime the soil where I want to grow beans. The plants have symbiotic relationship with a bacteria that allows atmospheric nitrogen to get into the soil. An acre of legumes can breathe in 100 pounds of nitrogen, which is great for the next crop.

"The entire organism of the plant-world is divided into two when we contemplate it in relation to nitrogen. Observe it as a kind of nitrogen-breathing, and the entire organism of the plant-world is thus divided. On the one hand, where we encounter any species of legumes, we are observing as it were the paths of the breathing, and where we find any other plants, there we are looking at the remaining organs, which breathe in a far more hidden way and have indeed other specific functions. We must learn to regard the plant-world in this way. Every plant species must appear to us, placed in the total organism of the plant-world, like the single human organs in the total organism of man." (Agriculture, R. Steiner)

Legumes are the lungs of the earth, breathing in nitrogen from the air. Beans were second only to potatoes in the gardens of yesteryear. They are a great source of protein, vitamins and energy. Not only good food, they're good for the soil, too, and easy as beans to grow.

Fresh shelly beans are picked when the pods are leathery. The pinto type we grow is Dwarf Horticulture, and they turn a beautiful red with yellow streaks. The plump beans don't need long to cook, they are already swelled with air from growing. If you eat beans you'll fall in love with fresh ones.

The other shelly bean we grow is Black Turtle. These are smaller. I don't get around to harvesting many of the beans when fresh; we let them dry on the vine. Then we pull the plants, pluck off the dry pods, and put them up in the barn loft to continue drying. It's fun to sit next to a friend and visit while shucking beans.

Beans come true, which means you can save seed easily. But I found an interesting plant that looks like a cross between the pinto and black bean. I've never noticed one before, but it's bigger than the black bean and the pod has the pinto spots, but the seed is a deep purple color. Maybe I'll plant these seeds and see what happens next year.

Beans are an important part of our diet, so we grow many long rows. When I pull up a plant, I can see the small white nodules that have swelled on the roots. This is nitrogen from the air that will fertilize our next crop. Beans, breath and air are food for us, food for the soil, and food for thought.