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BEAN BASICS FOR MEATLESS MEALS

What distinguishes a bean from other plants? Bean plants have pods with seeds inside them. The big bean family includes not only hundreds of varieties of beans but peas and lentils as well. We'll show you how easy it is to fit slow-soaking beans into fast-paced lives, and the best uses for canned and frozen beans, lentils and peas.

To start, beans are really good for you. They're high in protein and fiber, low in fat and sodium, and rich in B vitamins (including folate). They also contain potassium, magnesium, iron and zinc. The fiber in legumes is largely soluble. Soluble fiber lowers elevated levels of blood cholesterol and helps regulate blood sugar.

DRIED BEANS

White, black, pinto, cranberry, cannellini, turtle, kidney, soldier ... dried beans come with many names and in many colors.

Preparation is similar for all and often one variety can be substituted for another in recipes. Some points to remember:

- Dried beans need to cook for a long time, an hour at least, sometimes longer. It depends on variety, freshness and storage condition.
- First, pick over the beans to remove any broken ones or stones. Rinse well and soak them in water overnight.
- Drain, rinse, place beans in a large saucepan and add enough water to cover by 1 inch. Simmer until tender. Stir from time to time and add more water if needed.
- The slow cooker is ideal for cooking beans. Add soaked beans, chopped onion, garlic, thyme and a bay leaf. Add hot water to cover. Cook until tender, about 3 hours. Add salt to taste and cook another 15 minutes.
- One cup of dried beans yields about 2 cups of cooked beans.
- During simmering, season the beans with strong herbs, such as a bay leaf, sage, rosemary or thyme.
- Add salt along with mild herbs, such as cilantro, mint, marjoram or parsley, near the end of cooking.
- To save time, make a large batch and freeze what you're not going to eat. You can store the beans in several lock-tight freezer bags. Thaw them as needed, and use them to enrich soups and stews.



Make Tuscan-style beans by simmering cranberry beans in chicken broth. Toward the end of cooking, stir in chopped tomatoes, garlic, sage and olive oil. Simmer until beans are soft. Serve with crusty bread. Perfect for a cold, frosty night!

FROZEN BEANS

Convenience comes in cold packages! While there is not a lot of choice in quick-cooking frozen legumes, what you do find will be tasty and good. Check your supermarket freezer case for frozen baby lima beans, butter beans, green soybeans (edamame), green peas and black-eyed peas.



For a quick-and-dirty hoppin' John, stir frozen black-eyed peas into a pan of simmering rice pilaf about 5 minutes before the rice is done. It goes great with collards and a tomato salad.

Or make a skillet succotash by sautéing diced onion, peppers, corn kernels and lima beans. Season with a spoonful or two of jalapeño jelly, serve with cornbread and call it a meal!

QUICKTAKES



MEAL PLANNING WITHOUT THE MEAT

Americans are changing their meat-eating habits. More and more meat eaters are balancing their diet with meat-free meals. There are several reasons behind this change.

Some cite health concerns. Others worry about the environmental impact of raising meat animals. Some find that meat is just too expensive.

The fact is we don't need meat to live. Plants can provide all the nutrients, including protein and iron, our bodies need. When you replace meat with plants, you consume healthier fats, more fiber and more nutrients.

It's easy to create balanced, satisfying meatless meals when you start with beans. This month's newsletter looks at bean basics and offers quick meal ideas that will put more beans on your plate.

CANNED BEANS

Canned beans are as nutritious as dried beans, except for the salt that's added during canning. Some canned bean basics:

- Compare labels when shopping. Choose brands with less than 200mg sodium per serving.
- Open can and rinse to remove excess salt before adding to recipes.
- One 15-oz. can contains about 2 cups of beans.



Keep a can of chickpeas (aka garbanzos) in the fridge for a cool addition to summer salads. Rinse, drain and toss with a little olive oil and chopped parsley before combining with arugula or baby spinach.

In a food processor, puree 1 can drained cannellini or other white beans along with 1/4 cup chopped red bell pepper, 1 clove garlic and a pinch of thyme. Use as a dip for raw vegetables or triangles of whole-wheat pita bread.

LENTILS

Cooking dried beans is a serious time commitment. Cooking lentils is not. Lentils require no soaking and cook in about 20 minutes. There's more to like about lentils:

- They come in a range of colors, from basic brown to a brilliant orange.
- The dark green French "Puy" lentils are particularly flavorful.
- Yellow lentils and orange-hued red lentils are sold in East Indian markets and health food stores.



In a food processor, puree 1 can drained cannellini or other white beans along with 1/4 cup chopped red bell pepper, 1 clove garlic and a pinch of thyme. Use as a dip for raw vegetables or triangles of whole-wheat pita bread.

PEAS

Even peas, often mistaken for a green vegetable but actually a legume, pile on the protein: A 2/3-cup serving contains about 5 grams of protein, or about 10 percent of the protein needs of a 130-lb. person. Peas are also an excellent source of lutein, a yellow-green carotenoid that's believed to help fight macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in people age 65 and older.

- Yellow lentils and orange-hued red lentils are sold in East Indian markets and health food stores.
- There's no need to precook. Simply thaw in a colander under running water for a few seconds.



Do you bring lunch to work? Mix up the routine with sesame noodles and peas. Cook soba or whole-wheat spaghetti. Drain and rinse. Put noodles in a plastic lunch container. Add soy sauce, a few drops sesame oil, chopped peanuts and a couple handfuls of still-frozen peas. Stir to cool. Cover and pop into your lunchbox.

CAULIFLOWER AND CHICKPEA CURRY

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

INGREDIENTS

2 teaspoons olive oil
2 cups small cauliflowerets
1 small zucchini, diced
1 onion, sliced
2 cloves garlic, chopped
2 teaspoons curry powder
1/2 cup low-sodium vegetable broth or water
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 pinch cayenne pepper
1 can (15 oz) low-sodium chickpeas, drained
1/3 cup golden raisins
1/3 cup chopped fresh parsley or cilantro

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large heavy skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add cauliflower, zucchini, onions and garlic; sauté until just tender, about 5 minutes. Sprinkle with curry powder and cook, stirring, for 30 seconds.
2. Add broth or water, salt, cayenne, chickpeas and raisins. Cook until heated through, about 2 minutes. Stir in parsley or cilantro just before serving.



NUTRITIONAL INFO

240 Calories
4g Fat
1g Saturated fat
9g Protein
33g Carbohydrate
9g Fiber
361mg Sodium