



Cowpea

cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) isiZulu: imbumba

The cowpea is a tough annual legume that has become popular in the dry tropics and subtropics worldwide. However, wild cowpeas are found only in Africa and Madagascar, and it appears that cowpeas were first domesticated in west and east Africa. From here they spread to southeast Asia together with sorghum and millet 3 500 years ago, to the Mediterranean and eventually to the Americas.

Delicious, nutritious, ancient legume

Cowpeas are a versatile food that can be prepared in many ways. The green pods, dry and fresh leaves, cooked dry beans, and cooked or raw fresh beans can all be eaten. The beans are also ground into a paste or flour, and can be processed into a milk in the same way as soya beans.

Their importance as an African staple ensured their inclusion in the cuisines of the African diaspora. The African tradition of eating “black-eyed” peas (cream or tan cow peas with a dark eye) with rice is widespread in southern USA, and this dish, called “Hoppin John” is eaten with collard greens on New Years’ Day to bring good luck. In west Africa and the Caribbean, fried cowpea fritters are served for breakfast and snacks.

Cowpeas are an important source of carbohydrates (63%) and proteins (25%), with low fat content (1.5%); as well as being rich in vitamins B1, B2 and B9 and the minerals calcium, phosphorus and iron.



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A versatile food, cowpeas are an African staple.

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Growing cowpeas

Cowpeas do best in warm conditions and don't tolerate frost. They prefer well-drained soil, and do well in poor and sandy soils. Symbiotic *Rhizobium* bacteria in its root nodules fix atmospheric nitrogen in the soil. The plant's strong taproot helps it to survive dry conditions, and it can produce in areas with as little as 300mm of rain per year, making this an important crop in dryer parts of Africa.

Cowpeas are an invaluable crop to small-holder farmers providing food for people, animals and the next crop. Cowpeas are renowned as a “hungry season crop” because they provide food before grain crops are ready. They can be used flexibly, depending on nutrients and moisture, to provide a bean crop or be left to produce more fodder. The entire plant can be fed to livestock, and is easily dried and stored as hay. Cowpeas are usually intercropped with grains to improve the soil and provide a dense living mulch that suppresses weeds and prevents erosion.

Unfortunately, multinational biotech interests are now targeting the crop – projects to commercialise genetically modified cowpeas containing Bt insect toxins are underway in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Malawi.

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.