

Lablab Bean and the Reawakened 25

LABLAB BEAN IS AS EQUALLY BEAUTIFUL AS AN ORNAMENT AS IT IS DELICIOUS TO EAT. Its aesthetics originally made it a popular ornamental plant but its seeds were even better. In fact, the entire lablab plant is edible from its roots to the leaves. The beans, when well boiled, can be used to make tempeh and tofu. It was particularly popular in Kenya where it was believed to be good for people with special dietary needs, like breastfeeding mothers. It actually has a very good nutritional profile that confirms it is beautiful inside and out. Its beauty, however, didn't help during the colonization of Kenya, when most of the local crops were being substituted by more commercial varieties. Today it has been identified as one of the most promising crops for improving food security and adaptation to climate change.



LABLAB BEAN

Lablab Purpureus

Origin: Africa
Grown across Africa, Asia, America
Nutrient dense and versatile legume high in protein, potassium, and iron

Lablab bean is definitely the cutest legume one could ever see. Its aesthetics make it a very popular ornamental plant, but what's inside is even better. The whole lablab plant is completely edible from its roots to the leaves. The beans, when well-boiled, can be used to make tempeh and tofu. It is particularly popular in Kenya where it is believed to be good for people with special dietary needs, like breastfeeding mothers. Unfortunately, colonization in Kenya forced local crops to be substituted by commercial varieties. Today, the lablab bean is returning to popularity, identified as one of the most promising crops for improving food security and adaptation to climatic changes.

BOTANY

The lablab bean, also called hyacinth, is an annual legume that grows 3-6 meters tall in tropical climates. There are many varieties of different sizes, colors, and shapes of leaves, pods, and flowers. The leaves of a lablab are alternate and trifoliate with a smooth surface and an underside with small hairs. The flowers are small, on average 1.5 cm in length, and range from white to blue to purple depending on the variety. The smooth, linear pods range in size and color, from black to purple, and green, and have 2-8 beans. It has a deep taproot and other roots that sprout outwards from it, making it resistant to drought (feedipedia).

CULINARY USE

The young beans, leaves, flowers, and even the roots of the lablab are commonly eaten. Mature beans can also be cooked, but take longer and require changing the water in which they are boiled multiple times. In Southeast Asia, lablab is cooked into curries, bean cakes, and dahl (CABI). In other parts of Asia, the beans are cooked and made into tofu or fermented into tempeh. In parts of Africa, the beans are cooked into soups, mashed and fried, and eaten with maize (Lost Crops of Africa). Lablab is also used as animal fodder, forage, and green manure.

NUTRITION AND MEDICINAL USE

Lablab has a crude protein content of 20-28 percent, with moderately well-balanced amino acids, and an especially high lysine content of 6-7 percent which is a good complement to cereal diets. Methionine, however, is notably low at 0.65 percent, so the protein profile should not be considered complete. Among legumes, they are extremely rich in Iron (Lost Crops of Africa). In addition to iron, lablab beans have high amounts of Calcium, Potassium, Manganese, Copper, and Zinc. There are also some known medicinal uses of lablab such as an antidote to most forms of poison. It is also used to treat cholera, vomiting, and diarrhea. In addition, the juice from the pods has been used to treat inflammation of the ears and throat (Natural Medicinal Herbs).

AGRICULTURE

Lablab grows well in areas with high temperatures and high rainfall. It has a low tolerance to frost that, if light, will damage the leaves, but not kill the plant. Its deep root system allows it to use any remaining soil moisture, making it resistant to drought. Lablab grows best in soils with good drainage but can tolerate a variety of soil textures from sandy to clay. It prefers lower altitudes but has been grown in the tropics at up to 2000 meters. It is an easy crop to establish and manage (CABI).

HISTORY

Lablab originated in Africa and has since been cultivated in tropical regions of Asia and the Americas. It has been cultivated since ancient times as a garden crop and more recently has been used as forage and green manure. Coconut, rubber, and oil-palm farm managers also use lablab as a way to suppress weeds and rejuvenate soils. Though it originated in Africa, it has since become more popular in Asian countries and is almost unheard of today in African countries. There is a high potential for lablab to provide valuable nutrition, rural development, and environmental stability throughout Africa and beyond (Lost Crops of Africa).

RESEARCH

Although lablab is an ancient crop, it has only been studied more recently, from around the 1950s. It is a crop worth studying further given its potential for providing nutritional value as it is high in protein and essential minerals, because it is easy to grow, and has a variety of uses: human food, animal forage, green manure (FAO). The lablab is a multi-purpose legume that has the potential to overcome climate change threats such as increased temperatures, drought, and rainfall. Introducing the lablab especially in areas with smallholder farms has many potential benefits such as increased crop diversity, improved soil fertility, and increased household dietary diversity (Nord).

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