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# Everyday Mysteries

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**Question**

## Are black-eyed peas really peas?

**Answer**

No.



[Blackeye pea](#). Federal Grain Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture Marketing Service.

[Skip to main content](#) *(unguiculata)* are a variety of the cowpea and are part of the family of beans & peas (*Vicia faba* in the USA). Although called a pea, it is actually a bean. Both peas and beans are

legumes, and both have edible seeds and pods. According to the *Penguin Companion to Food*, bean is a “term loosely applied to any legume whose seeds or pods are eaten, not classed separately as a pea or lentil.” Beans traditionally were in the genus *Phaseolus*, but now some of the species, including the black-eyed pea, are in the genus *Vigna*. Peas are in the genus *Pisum*.



**Black-eyed pea plant.** Thomas Jefferson praised it as “... very productive, excellent food for man and beast.” Historic Jamestowne, National Park Service.

The common names of beans and peas are not consistent; other legumes popularly called “peas” are the butterfly pea (*Clitoria ternatea*), the chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), pigeon peas (*Cajanus cajan*), and the winged pea (*Lotus tetragonolobus*). As legumes they are extremely nourishing vegetables, both to people and to the soil. They are able to fix nitrogen, meaning nitrogen from the air is taken in by the plant and bacteria living in the roots convert it to a useable plant nutrient. Because of this process, nitrogen-fixing plants improve soil quality by adding nutrients back into the soil.



[Southern black-eyed-peas](#). What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl.

## Fun Facts about black-eyed peas:

- Cultivated since pre-historic times in China and India, they are related to the mung bean. The ancient Greeks and Romans preferred them to chickpeas.
- Brought to the West Indies by enslaved West Africans, by earliest records in 1674.
- Originally used as food for livestock, they became a staple of the slaves' diet. During the Civil War, black-eyed peas (field peas) and corn were thus ignored by Sherman's troops. Left behind in the fields, they became important food for the Confederate South.
- In the American South, eating black-eyed peas and greens (such as collards) on New Year's Day is considered good luck: the peas symbolize coins and the greens symbolize paper money.
- They are a key ingredient in Hoppin' John (peas, rice and pork) and part of African-American "soul food."
- Originally called *mogette* (French for nun). The black eye in the center of the bean (where it attaches to the pod) reminded some of a nun's head attire.

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## Related Websites

- [Peas, Black-eyed](#) (USDA) - Fact sheet on storage, cooking, nutritional facts, and a few recipes. PDF.
- [New Year's Day Black-eyed Peas](#) (National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) - From the White House archives, First Lady Laura Bush's recipe for New Year's Day Black-eyed Peas.
- [Hoppin' John](#) (National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) - From the White House archives, a recipe for Hoppin' John in a blog post from Let's Move, at the Obama White House.
- [Black-Eyed Pea Fritters](#) (Peace Corps) - A recipe from the Peace Corps in Africa, using fresh peas.
- [New Southernpeas Developed by ARS, Cooperators](#) (USDA) - Research news from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) discusses two varieties of southernpeas—WhipperSnapper and GreenPack-DG, introduced in 2005.

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## Further Reading

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- [Cowpea.](#)
- [Cooking, American--Southern style.](#)
- [African American cooking.](#)

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