

With at least some cooler days and nights as we move toward the fall equinox, the gardening season is winding down. We have welcomed the recent rains, and we can use much more. But, the beans in the garden that are destined for baked casseroles, soup, and chili would prefer a dry fall. Still, some have already ripened, and we picked pails full of several kinds this past week. Then, some of the neighboring girls from the Amish community helped me shell them.

The young men of that community spent an evening helping Runo on a barn project, but the young women wanted to come, too, so the bean shelling resulted. They shelled and chatted, and the time went by quickly. When the pizza delivery arrived, everybody came together and ate and visited.

Shelling dry beans can be a pleasant job if conditions are right. The beans must be very dry and crisp so that they release their contents with alacrity. Some of these were in that shape, but the humid weather had made others more limp and less willing to cooperate. But, the girls persisted, and at the end of the evening, we had several bowls of brightly colored beans to show for the work.

Dry beans are such a good crop. We can use them in so many ways, and they store well. There is no need to process them in any way before they are put away in a cool place to await winter use. We do often throw the bags in the freezer for a couple of weeks before storing in a pail in the root cellar, because I read that freezing will eliminate any possibility of their retaining any small boring insects that can infest dry beans.

Our choice of varieties changes from year to year. There are some standards, but we usually plant at least one kind of bean that is new to us. They are so beautiful when ripe that it seems a shame to just grow the same old kinds year after year. Admittedly, beans aren't nearly as colorful and pretty when cooked, but seeing them in their dry form is as engaging to the eye as looking at flowers or jewels. Dry beans can be truly spectacular in appearance.

This year, we grew five kinds of dry beans. Black turtle beans provide the base for many soups, either as a main ingredient or as a nutritious addition to other contents. I often use them in chili, and they make a good soup on their own with some frozen corn and a jar of salsa. Tortillas are tasty when filled with black beans, onions, and garlic.

Swedish brown beans are also a staple. We like them cooked—with a bit of smoked pork if we have it—and seasoned with maple syrup and vinegar. Thursday is brown bean day in Swedish tradition, but we eat them whenever we wish. They also work well as baked beans.

Maine Sunset beans are, in the words of the Fedco seed catalog, “beautiful plump round-oval ivory-white beans irregularly splotched with brownish-maroon splashes around the hilum. A wonderful baking bean with a creamy texture.” We didn't have many of them and will save some for next year's seeds.

King of the Early are colorful kidney-like beans that I use in chili. They are large, easy to grow, and very reliable. The rosy-red and white beans are also very productive.

Then, there are the Fast Lady Northern Southern Pea bean. This cowpea is tiny, and, from our first experience this year, easy to grow. We had a tremendous crop of the long, slim pods that are chock full of little cream-colored beans. We have never planted them before, so it will be interesting to see if they are as tasty as they are pretty. According to the seed catalog, they cook quickly, too.

So, the first installment of one more fall gardening task has been accomplished. If we have a dry week, we will pick more of the beans, but, otherwise, squash and pumpkins are next on the harvest list.

