

Raising as much of our food as we can leads to some extended activities that may seem boring to others, or at the least, odd ways to spend the evenings. But, if one looks at things in a little different way, it changes the narrative. And, carried another step, which we do not, it might even approach Tom Sawyer and the fence whitewashing as an activity that draws others into the scheme.

We try to plant crops that will sustain us as much as possible. This means that we use a good portion of our garden to produce calorie and protein rich vegetables. We try to have plenty of potatoes to carry us through the winter, and we plant several kinds of dry beans.

At this time of year, most of these beans are ready to harvest or soon will be at that stage. So, we need to pick them or pull the plants, and then somehow extract the beans from the pods. There are easier and faster ways than the method we have chosen. We could pull the bean plants, lay them out on a tarp or clean barn floor, and then thresh them by “foot power,” (walking over the dry pods repeatedly, or with an old-fashioned tool, a flail. This consisted of a short, round piece of a pole that was fastened to a longer section by a leather thong. This allowed the flail to be swung, and striking the pile of beans with the implement caused the beans to shatter, releasing them from the pods. There are also machine methods, of course, for threshing dry beans.

But, I like the quiet, contemplative process of sitting by the table with two pails on the floor in front of me, one filled with dry bean pods and the other ready to receive the empties. A bowl in my lap gradually fills with beans as I hand shell them.

This isn't the fastest way to shell beans, but the end result, with nothing that needs sorting out, is worth the effort. Also, I like shelling beans. I can sit during the evening, conversation or podcast entertaining and enlightening me, and also feel a sense of accomplishment.

I don't do this alone. Runo doesn't mind sitting with his own bowl and pails, and the rattle of dry beans comes from both sides of the room. So, we gradually do this job, and it is not onerous.

Looking at the dry beans as we shell is also a reward in itself. We always plant several kinds, and though many of them become “blah beige” when cooked, in the dry state most are quite beautiful. This year, we planted King of the Early, Cannellini, Black Coco, Agave Pinto, Kidney, and Saturday Night Bakers. The colors, sizes,

and shapes vary. King of the Early beans are mostly dark red with pale mottling. They are good in all kinds of soups and chili dishes. Cannellini beans are also called white kidney, and they have that shape and size. They make good soup. Black Coco are unusual beans in that they are much larger than most black beans. They are also a little more work to get free from the shells. But, it is worth it! Agave Pinto are beige and tan beans with occasional all brown specimens. The kidney beans are light red, not the dark ones we often use in chili soups. And the Saturday Night bakers are old-fashioned navy beans, small and white, that make superb baked beans or bean soup.

It is worth growing beans just for their beauty. But, they are an important nutritional source, particularly for their protein and the micronutrients they pack in, especially potassium, magnesium, folate, iron, and zinc. And, it is so easy to store them. They keep for years in dry conditions. We do try to use up our beans every year, though, as the “new beans” cook more quickly. And, when the rain and snow and cold of fall and winter arrive, we know we have sustenance for the weeks and months ahead if we have a good supply of dry beans and stored potatoes. And, they are both bases for delicious meals.