

# THE BEAN MAN

It can be said with some assurance that probably no one in the world knows more about raising (and eating) beans than John Withee of Lynnfield, Massachusetts — all 5000-plus varieties!



by Lawrence F. Willard

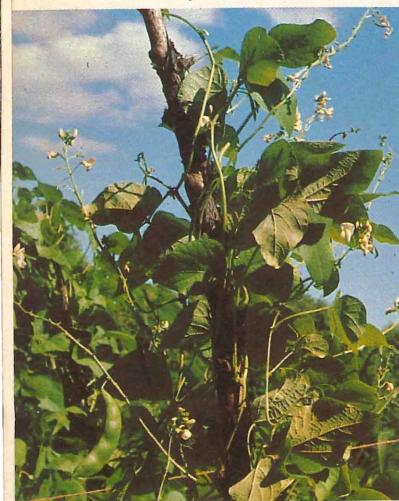
□ IT IS ALWAYS PLEASANT TO HOLD conversation with someone who really knows his beans, and if it's beans you're interested in, John E. Withee, of Lynnfield, Massachusetts, not only would like to talk to you, but he might even put you to work.

Withee wants to preserve America's heirloom beans, those older species which are dying out or which never were grown on a very large scale. But you can't store beans away in a museum and expect them to germinate after more than three or four years, and unlike apple trees, you can't plant beans and forget them for 30 or 40 years. Beans have to be renewed periodically if a variety is to be saved from extinction, and Withee in his retirement years has dedicated himself to this task.

The best way to renew beans is to plant them every couple of years, raise a crop, and save the seeds for the next planting. Easy? No. There are more than 5000 different varieties of beans — nobody knows for sure how many more — and Withee has trouble enough perpetuating the 300 varieties he now cares for on less than an acre of land. To ease the strain he decided to invite other people to help him with his project, forming a non-profit organization he named Wanigan Associates, Inc. He took the name from the Abnaki or Algonquian Indian word which was given to the cookshack on a raft which floated on streams and rivers during early Maine logging operations. There is a connection: Thoreau wrote that a large portion

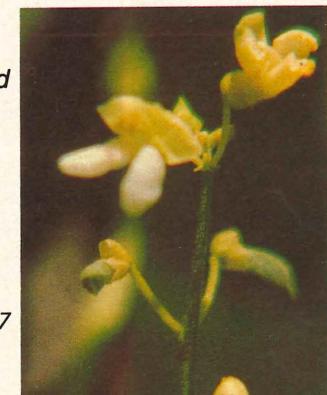
*Photo opposite shows an old variety of pole bean, Lazy Wife, one of the several hundred kinds of beans John Withee perpetuates on less than one acre.*





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"There isn't such  
a thing as a good  
baked bean in  
the whole city  
of Boston."



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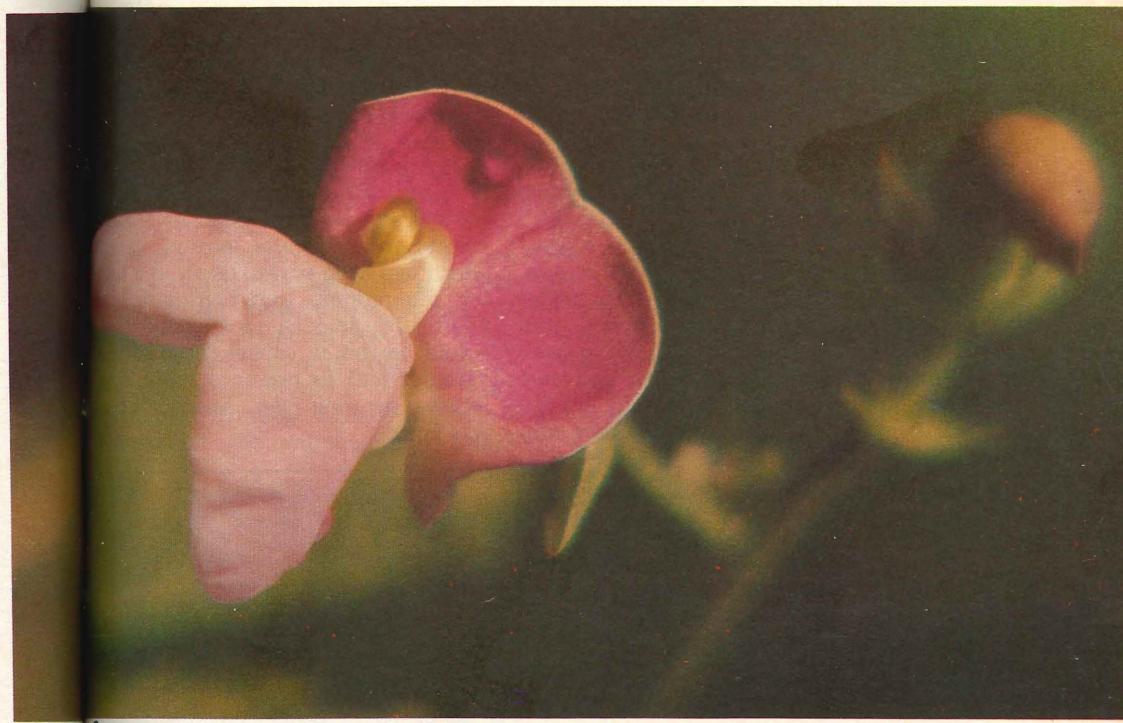
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of all the beans raised in Massachusetts found a market in Maine logging camps. Beans were an everyday item on the menu in the wanigan.

Withee has some strong ideas on various bean varieties as gourmet fare, and even stronger ideas on how they should be cooked. He is an avid bean eater as well as collector, and the habit goes back into his Maine childhood.

"We were poor, and my father dickered with someone for a barrel of yellow

eye beans. We lived on those during the winter. There were six kids in the family, and the bean pot was a big one. We ate beans every way you could eat beans. In the summer we used to cook beanhole beans, and it was my job when I came home from school on Friday to dig the beanhole out. We lived near an old brickyard and plenty of pallet wood was available. It was fun to build the fire and put down the bean pot my mother prepared. Then on Saturday night we would

dig up the pot and eat the beans. I never developed a dislike for beans.

"When we moved here ten years ago, we had the space, so I immediately dug a bean hole and revived a good old Maine custom. Then this law came along about outdoor burning, and I thought I couldn't do it anymore. I had some correspondence with John Gould up in Maine and he said that if I had bothered to get a copy of the law and read it, as he did, I would have found that outdoor fires are quite legal for cooking purposes, so I went at it again. I wanted some Jacob's cattle beans, but I couldn't find any in the market here. It was even hard to find a soldier bean."

What about the pea bean? Isn't that what goes into Boston baked beans, and aren't they supposed to be something special? Withee looked at me in sort of a pitying way, as if I didn't know much about beans.

"There isn't such a thing as a good baked bean in the whole city of Boston. They serve sort of lumpy bean soup, runny pea beans, oversweetened, and just horrible things. You've got to have the right bean to start with, and you have to know how to cook it to bring out the true bean flavor. You want to start with

Jacob's cattle beans, yellow eyes, or soldier beans. You don't want to add any sugar at all, and not too much molasses. Most people make their beans too sweet. We learned a lot about cooking beans from my wife's father up in Maine. Ruth and I both follow his recipe pretty much when we bake beans. One of his tricks is to put a piece of smoked slab bacon in the pot instead of salt pork. We use real smoked bacon, not that stuff that is just dipped in a smoky flavor."

Withee says it was the difficulty of finding proper beans in Massachusetts to put into his beanhole that took him back up to Maine and northern New Hampshire to look for remembered varieties of his childhood days. During this search he was introduced to a bean called Marafax which was being grown in northern New Hampshire. Withee found it to be a great baking bean and began wondering how many other little-known varieties might still be located, varieties which had been passed down in a family for generations, true heirloom beans. Gradually the idea took shape that it would be fun to collect these different varieties and to preserve them with a renewal growing plan. And so a hobby was born.

At first the preservation of heirloom beans was easily a one-man operation. But as Withee began to correspond with bean lovers everywhere, his collection grew, and with it the demands on his time and his finances. At first it was a part-time operation — Withee had not yet retired as medical photographer at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. But with retirement he solved one problem, only to make the other one more acute. He now had the time he needed, but the increasing costs of his operation could not be sustained on a retirement income. The creation of Wanigan Associates will, he hopes, bring in enough funds to take care of the expenses of operation, so that Withee can continue to renew the varieties in his collection and make seeds available to those who are interested in growing these beans.

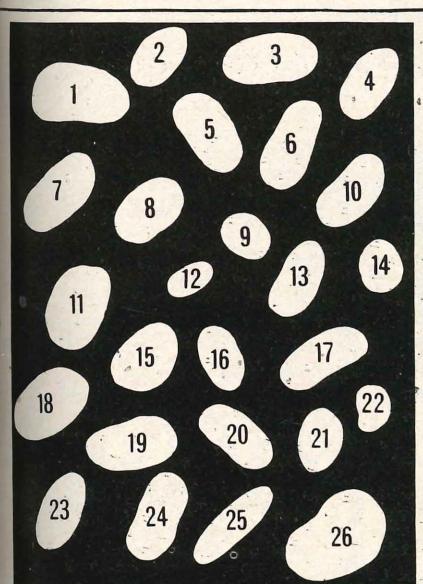
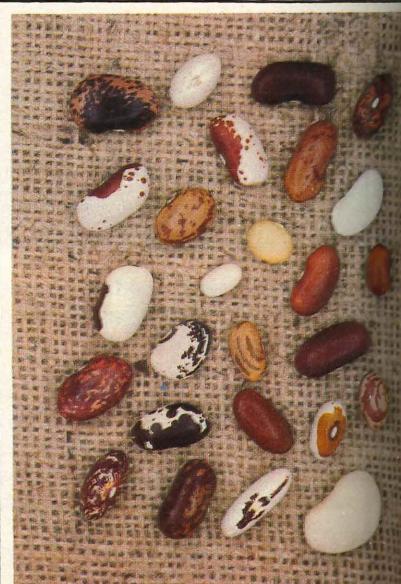
Since Withee does not have land enough to grow all of the varieties of beans that need renewal, he has worked out an ingenious scheme to get other people to do some of the growing for him — currently about 200 bean growers. It works like this: you send for Wanigan's catalogue of beans (262 Salem St., Lynnfield, MA 01940) which lists all of the varieties now under

Withee's protection. If you're interested, you send \$5 (tax deductible) and select two varieties you wish to grow. Wanigan sends you two packets of those varieties, plus two more varieties that Withee selects — these are varieties in need of renewal. At the end of the growing season you send the seeds of the two renewal varieties back to Wanigan and you get two more packets of seed of your choice for the next year's planting. Along with all this will go a subscription to Wanigan's bean newsletter, which Withee describes as being "strictly beany."

Withee is also interested in tracking down new bean varieties for his collection, particularly heirloom beans, home-saved bean seed that has a history. He needs the history of the bean, its growth characteristics, and all other information that he can get. He gets some interesting contributions, such as the King Tut beans received from a woman in Maine who said she got them from a gardening friend of her mother's in England. Withee carries them in the catalogue with the interesting note that an amazing history is claimed for the bean; supposedly it is a descendant of beans found in King Tut's tomb. Withee has reservations

(continued on page 155)

*Withee is also interested in tracking down new bean varieties for his collection, particularly home-saved seed that has a history.*



All of the 26 different beans shown in the photo (far left) and identified in the key (left) can be found in the catalog of Wanigan Associates, Inc. — the complete listing of over 300 varieties John Withee is trying to preserve for posterity. They are: (1) Scarlet Runner, (2) Marrow, (3) Canadian Wonder, (4) Horticultural No. 4, (5) Jacob's Cattle "gasless", (6) Littleton, (7) Jacob's Cattle, (8) Worcester, (9) Sulphur, (10) Champagne, (11) Bumble Bee, (12) Navy Pea, (13) New Hampshire Red Kidney, (14) Marafax, (15) Speckled Butter, (16) Scotia, (17) Red Pole, (18) Scarlet Beauty, (19) Black Trout, (20) Maine Kidney, (21) Yellow Eye, (22) Speckled Cranberry, (23) Towle, (24) Parker, (25) Big Soldier, (26) King of the Garden.

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## THE BEAN MAN (continued from page 69)

tions about such ancestry. He says the beans are similar to a white kidney bean, and white kidney beans were unknown in Egypt at the time of King Tut, but are native to Peru. However, the bean is worthy of preservation, and the name King Tut has a certain fascination, whether one believes the story or not.

Withee himself grows bean varieties that other people don't seem to want to grow, and for some reason his growers don't like pole beans.

"That's something that's hard for me to understand," he says. "Pole beans are easy to grow, and I have had much success with them. One of the best of these is the Lila Stuart which came from Maine. It is very productive and bears a fairly large, white seed with a large smooth, deep red eye."

Although to Withee a bean is a bean, and all are worth preserving, he has his favorites. His favorites for baked beans have been mentioned. For snap beans he likes the old and still popular Kentucky Wonder, along with Bountiful and Blue Lake. Bountiful has been grown by one family for more than 40 years, and Blue Lake is also a very good dry bean. For shell beans, Withee prefers the horticultural varieties because of their appealing colors.

"When I was a kid," Withee says, "we used to shell the beans and put them out in pint baskets. Most people preferred to buy them that way, and they looked a lot better than the ordinary brown or gray beans in the pod. In New Hampshire they have developed a number of new varieties with red pods, beans with names like Flash, Brilliant, French Horticultural and Horticultural Number Four. Now these are very good to sell at roadside stands; they're attractive and people buy them."

Some of the older and rarer heirloom beans which have come to Withee have long histories. Caseknife was known in 1820. This bean from Maine is a climber and bears brown beans of irregular shape in flat pods. Another heirloom bean, North Haven Red from Connecticut, was grown as early as 1700. It has a small, irregular dusty pink seed. But the

Black Kidney Bean is pictured in John Gerard's *The Herball, or generall historie of plants*, published in London in 1597.

The bean is not a native European plant, says Withee, and was unknown there before Columbus' voyage. It became one of the blessings of the discovery of the new world. Beans were a South American plant, and probably also grew in Mexico. The Indians made wide use of the bean and it probably spread all over America through Indian commerce. North American Indians had the bean when the colonists arrived, bringing with them beans from Europe which were identical with the ones they found here — the beans had come full circle, back where they started from.

The bean, while it is very high in protein, is also lacking in some amino acids so that it is not a complete protein. The Indians seem to have known this, and mixed their beans with corn or with other grains which would supply the missing elements. They appear also to have sometimes cooked meat with beans, as we add salt pork. Succotash, or corn and lima beans, was an Indian invention. Soybeans have the highest protein content, but most varieties don't do very well in New England. They are very sensitive to photoperiodism, or the length of hours of sunlight, so that a move of 100 miles or so north or south requires another variety of soybean.

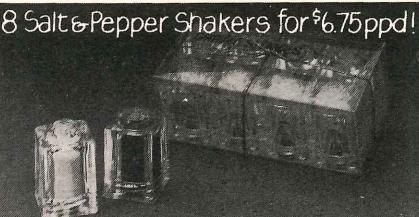
New Englanders have various preferences for bean varieties, depending on where they live. Maine people like the Jacob's cattle bean, and they are fond of the red kidney bean which is often stewed and is commercially canned. A similar bean in Withee's collection is the Canada or Canada Red bean, which may have been an Indian favorite. Vermonters prefer a bean which seems identical to Jacob's cattle, but is called Trout and is listed in Withee's catalogue as a separate variety, a Vermont heirloom bean. One authority believes that Trout may be a German variety, Forellen. In Massachusetts, of course, the favorite is the Navy pea bean. Another variety, Great Northern, is similar but the seeds are larger. Yellow eye beans are often con-

### The Bean Man (continued)

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fused with dot eye and soldier beans, but all are popular baking beans except in pea bean territory.

The interview ended at the Withee home with an evening meal of baked Jacob's cattle beans (Withee's recipe and cooking), baked ham, brown bread and a green salad, all topped off with apple pie. It was a very superior New England meal.

Mrs. Withee was asked if she liked beans as much as her husband did. She nodded.

"Yes, I've learned to like them."

\* \* \*

### JOHN E. WITHEE'S RECIPE FOR BAKED BEANS

Wash and pick over one pound of Jacob's cattle, yellow eye or soldier beans. Soak overnight in ample water. Bring to boil in *same water*, (according to John Withee this improves the digestability of the beans and retains vitamins) then simmer until skins break. Add water if needed.

Season with:

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons dry mustard
- ½ teaspoon powdered ginger
- 4 tablespoons blackstrap molasses

Put in bean pot with ¼ pound of smoked bacon on bottom of pot, and a 1/8 pound piece on top of the beans. Bake at 250 degrees all day, 8 A.M. to 6 P.M.

Withee says you can use salt pork, but smoked bacon is better. Don't score to the rind, score the rind — then you will have an easier time serving, and you'll have ready-cut pieces of bacon or salt pork.

### BEAN CHOWDER

- 1 cup dry white beans
- ¼ pound salt pork cubed
- 1 large onion chopped
- 1 large potato cubed
- chopped celery tips and leaves

Soak the beans in water to cover for 4 hours and put to simmer. Brown the pork and onion in a pan and then add to simmering beans. Add the potato and celery to beans and simmer until tender. Thicken with flour and add milk to replace lost simmer water. Season and enjoy.

### FRIED BEAN CASSEROLE

Soak 1 cup dry beans overnight in water to cover (pea beans are fine). Drain, reserving water.

Fry the beans in a large skillet over medium heat, stirring constantly. When most of the

water has evaporated, add bacon drippings or oil, and continue frying for 10 to 15 minutes.

Place beans in a casserole. Add salt, syrup or molasses, and spices (to taste) to 1 cup of the reserved soaking water, and add to beans. Bake at 300° until beans are tender, about one to two hours.

This method of frying before baking will reduce baking time considerably. Rapid heating of dry beans reduces digestability, so pre-soaking is important.

### BEAN SAUSAGE WANIGAN

For this Sunday breakfast treat you should have leftover Saturday night beans, and leftover brown bread or cornbread.

Remove the visible pieces of pork from the cold beans and mash the beans without juice. Grind the dry cornbread and mix in some sausage seasoning to taste. Blend equal amounts of beans and corn, adjust seasoning, and fry as sausage cakes.

Poultry seasoning gives a fair flavor to it, but give a try to a mix of:

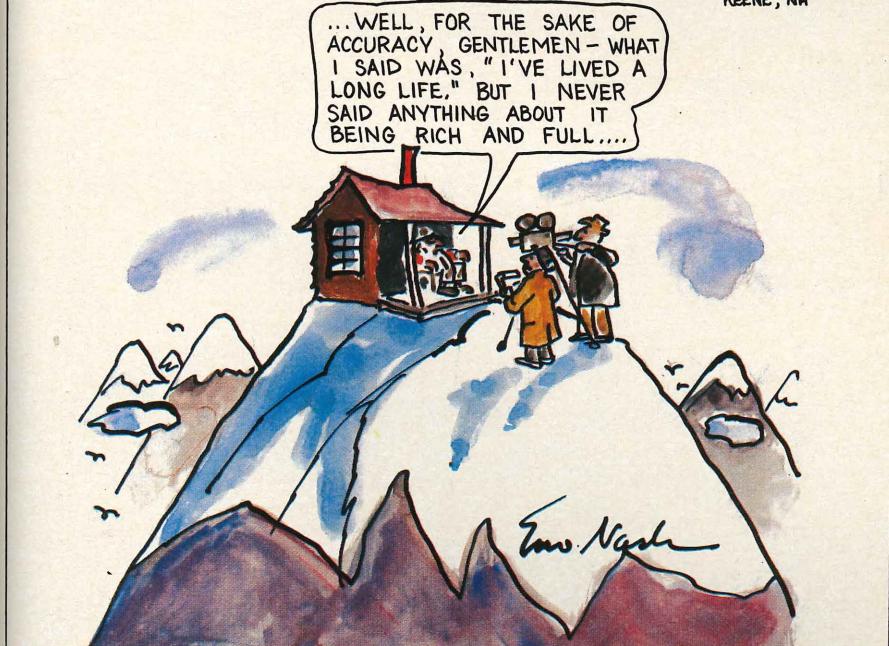
1 tablespoon salt

### YANKEE TINTINNABULATIONS

NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE — DOCTORS EDWARD A. MORTIMER, JR. OF CASE WESTERN U. AND RICHARD R. MONSON AND BRIAN MACMAHON OF HARVARD DISCUSSED THE POSSIBLE REASONS WHY MEN WHO LIVE AT HIGH ALTITUDES HAVE LESS CHANCE OF DYING FROM A HEART ATTACK. IN FACT, THE HIGHER THE ALTITUDE THE BETTER....

NEWS ITEM: DR. R.T. SNOWMAN KEENE, NH

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3 tablespoons powdered sage  
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1 teaspoon pepper

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### BROWN BREAD WITHOUT STEAMING

- 1½ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1 cup plain wheat germ
- 1 cup graham cracker crumbs

Mix together thoroughly, then, in a separate bowl, beat together:

- 2 eggs
- 1/3 cup salad oil
- 1 cup dark molasses
- 2 cups buttermilk

Add to dry mix, blend well, and pour into two greased and floured 1-pound coffee cans. Bake at 350° for 50 minutes. Test and turn out on rack to cool.

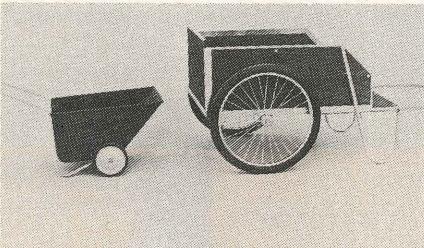
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**Contributors to this issue include:**

**Nancy Means Wright**, page 60 — owner and operator, with husband Spencer of "Cornwall Crafts," located three miles south of Middlebury, Vermont. Graduate of Vassar and Middlebury, she has written a novel *Scholar* and many magazine articles. (This story was inspired by her daughter's marriage in June 1976.)

**Francine G. Weeks**, page 70 — sports reporter covering Girls' Little League stories for the Dartmouth (Massachusetts) *Chronicle* and a member of the Board of Directors of the Dartmouth Girls' Little League. Originally from New Bedford.

**Joyce Palmer Ralph**, page 74 — a freelance writer and tutor in adult basic education in Somerville, Massachusetts. Her husband is the Mayor of Somerville, the Rev. S. Lester Ralph (see *YANKEE*, August 1970, "His Honor, The Reverend Ralph").

**Evan Randolph**, page 80 — an executive with Howard Johnson's living in Manchester, Massachusetts. Graduated from Harvard in 1957.

**Jeffrey G. Hunter**, page 86 — Manager of the Sales Administration of Curry Copy Centers of America, Worcester, Massachusetts. Is a Holy Cross graduate and plays the tuba.

**Eleanor R. Cederstrom**, page 92 — a teacher of Latin, Greek and Philosophy at the Agnes Irwin School in Rosemont, Pennsylvania. Educated at Smith, A.B., and Bryn Mawr, Ph.D (Greek), and was born in Putnam, Connecticut.

**Leigh Cree White**, page 190 — the book review editor for *Wilderness Camping* and freelance writer. Lives in Voorheesville, New York.

**COVER:** "Open Church Door," a painting by Katharine Newell Grimes owned by Dr. and Mrs. James L. Grace of Manchester, New Hampshire. The church is located at the Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut. A native of Gloucester, Massachusetts, Katharine Grimes has won over 30 awards in art shows around New England.

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June 1977