

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

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

- This blossom is the King of the Garden, a once-popular variety of lima bean.
- Adult bean weevil. The female deposits eggs on bean pods or seeds, and when the eggs hatch the larva feed on the beans. To protect against these pests, heat the harvested beans in the oven to 135°F for 30 minutes, cool and store in airtight containers.
- Lila Stuart beans, one of John Withee's favorite pole beans.
- Delicious Giant climbing beans. Withee finds his growers are less interested in climbing varieties even though they are easy to grow and take less garden space.
- North Haven Red, was grown in Connecticut as early as 1700.
- Close-up of the blossom of Jacob's cattle bean, Withee's favorite for baked beans.
- Blossom of the Christmas lima bean.
- Brilliant, a variety of horticultural bean, shown in the shell stage.
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 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 that put 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 Withee’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 reserva-

Withee is also interested in tracking down new bean varieties for his collection, particularly home-saved seed that has a history.
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THE BEAN MAN
(continued from page 69)

PSEUDOS
LA NEAN

Covered
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The Bean Man (continued)

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

"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 over­
night in ample water. Bring to boil in same
water, (according to John Withee this im­
proves the digestability of the beans and re­
tains vitamins) then simmer until skins break.
Add water if needed.

Season with:

2 tablespoons dry mustard
1 teaspoon powdered ginger
4 tablespoons blackstrap molasses
2 tablespoons brown sugar

Put in bean pot with ¼ pound of smoked
bacon on bottom of pot, and a 1½ 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 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 sim­
mer 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 heat­
ing 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 left­
over brown bread or cornbread.

Remove the visible pieces of pork from the
old 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,
giving a try to a mix of:

1 tablespoon salt
1 tablespoon summer savory
1 teaspoon powdered ginger

YANKEE TINTINNABULATIONS

by Eno Nash

NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE - DOCTORS EDWARD A. NOTTINGHAM, JR. OF CASE
WESTERN U. AND RICHARD P. MONSON AND BRIAN MACAHERON OF HARVARD DIS­
CUSS 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....

EVO NIGHTH
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.)
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”).
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.

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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CONTENTS

June 1977

THIS NEW ENGLAND
158 The Devil’s Pocketbook (Westport River, Massachusetts) — TOM BORDEN

ARTICLES
52 Who Shall Live in Amherst? (Growing pains and alternatives in southern New Hampshire) — AUSTIN STEVENS
60 The Bride Wore a Broomstick (Fiction) — NANCY MEANS WRIGHT
64 The Bean Man (Bringing back the good old bean varieties) — LAWRENCE F. WILLARD
70 Liberated Little Leaguers (True experience about little girls and baseball) — FRANCINE G. WEEKS
74 Do You Remember the Nation’s Most Glamorous Career Girl? (About the lady once closest to F.D.R.) — JOYCE PALMER RALPH
80 The Spirit of Commodore Truxtun (A family reunion, a famous ship, and a ghost) — EVAN RANDOLPH
86 The Science of Remembering Not to Forget (A sure-fire method) — JEFF HUNTER
92 Return to Cape Ann (A nostalgic, informative journey) — ELEANOR R. CEDERSTROM
190 One-Woman Animal Orphan Rescue League (Including where you can get a license to do the same) — LEIGH CREE WHITE

CENTERSPREAD
96-97 "Front Beach" (Rockport, Massachusetts), an oil painting by S. OHRVEL CARLSON

POETRY
192 FRANCES COULTER, JOSEPINE JACOBSEN, RAYMOND ROSELEIP, CONSTANCE URDANG

DEPARTMENTS
18 A New England Trip: University Square, Bridgeport, Connecticut — W. F. FRANCES
29, 146, 184 Classified Advertising
30 June Calendar of Events
40 The Original Yankee Swoppers’ Column
50 Sayings of the Oracle
110 Small Business and Crafts — DAMON RIPLEY

130,153 Earl and Waldo — ALAN FERGUSON
132, 157, 174 Yankee Tintinnabulations — ENO NASH
140 House for Sale (Hadlyme, Ct., and Boothbay, Me.)
151 I Remember — NED COMSTOCK
176 Books Received — GEOFFREY ELAN
188 Quips, Quotes and Queries