Rounding Up ‘Jacob’s Cattle’

The heirloom-bean business

Jack Cook

As befits his Maine background, John Withee speaks slowly and is quick to laugh. He delights in talk about his many interests—including, to be sure, beans. His romance with them, he will tell you, goes back fifty years, to the time he worked on a truck farm in Maine, sold vegetables in Portland, and learned how to bake enough bean-hole beans—the beans, in a cast-iron pot, are baked in a pit for twenty-four hours or so—to feed hundreds of hungry people at a single sitting.

His passion for beans took a new turn in 1970, when he decided to throw a bean-hole bash for a few dozen friends at his home in Massachusetts. Now, the tastiest cultivar you can use for bean-hole beans, he maintains, is ‘Jacob’s Cattle’, a medium-size, slender, white bean that is brilliantly splashed with bright maroon. It’s also known as ‘Coach Dog’, ‘Dalmatian’, and ‘Troite’. But when he went hunting for the beans for his bean-hole bash, not a single ‘Jacob’s Cattle’ could he find within fifty miles. His second choice was the ‘Soldier’ bean, white like ‘Jacob’s Cattle’ and similar in size, but marked around the eye with a distinct maroon figure resembling a soldier standing at attention. He found no ‘Soldier’ beans, either. He settled for some little white navy beans, and, though his friends told him the baked beans were the best they’d ever eaten, John Withee knew they’d have been better had they been ‘Jacob’s Cattle’. Or even ‘Soldier’.

A few weeks later Withee made a trip to Maine. The situation there was alarming. He found ‘Soldier’ beans, but nary a ‘Jacob’s Cattle’. Finally, on his way back to Massas-
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five years or so, even under good storage conditions). He was having a lot of fun. He especially enjoyed the letters he received from people who, like him, were crazy about beans. He had found himself a new hobby.

Withie retired from his job in 1976. That left him with a bit of time on his hands. Because he was having so much fun with beans, he figured he'd have even more fun if he expanded his bit. Besides, his closeness contained more beans than he had in his garden space. He created a nonprofit organization. He called it Wanigan Associates.

For an annual fee of two dollars (soon raised to five dollars, for reasons that will become poignantly clear), a member would receive a quarterly newsletter all about beans, written by Withie, and a catalog listing the cultivars he had accumulated. A member could select from the catalog any two cultivars. He paid a small charge if more cultivars were wanted. In addition, Withie would send along a few extra cultivars, which the member was expected to grow well and share with the Wanigan Associates. The Wanigan Associates also allowed a small charge for some cultivars.

Several weeks. Hundreds of envelopes, some full of beans, piled up. There were also many beans he had grown in his garden test plots the previous summer, which he did not yet thresh out.

Wanigan Associates, says John Withie today, "was my downfall." Characteristically, he laughs. "I'm a lousy businessman. The five-dollars a membership fee barely covered the cost of the newsletter, let alone the postage to reply to all those letters and mail out the beans.

Withie ran...."It had turned out to be a very good year," he says. "I'll still be sending some neglected varieties to growers with whom

The Family Leguminosae

The world of beans is complex. Members of the family Leguminosae, of which beans represent several genera, produce their seed in pods. The most common of the cultivated, edible beans is the genus Phaseolus, native to the tropical Americas. The most common species of the latter is Phaseolus vulgaris, which includes a huge number of cultivars and strains. There is also Phaseolus lunatus, the so-called lima bean, named for its origin in Peru, and Phaseolus cocineus, commonly known as the scarlet runner bean; it has a subspecies, albe, the white runner bean. There are more than four thousand cultivars of these three species.

There are many other genera in addition to Phaseolus. Glycine Max, the soybean, comprises several hundred cultivars; Vigna radiata, the mung bean; Vigna angularis, the adzuki bean; Vigna unguiculata, the so-called cowpea; and Viprac inscription, the fava bean, also known as the horsebean, as is the species Canavalia ensiformis, otherwise called the jack bean. The term kidney bean is sometimes used to refer to the entire Phaseolus vulgaris species, which is confusing because it is also the name of several cultivars of P. vulgaris, of which the red kidney is perhaps the best known. J.C.
I've established a strong relationship over the years.

Guy Thomas was graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., and went to work in New York City for the marketing department of a large corporation whose primary activity was the manufacture of plate glass. In 1949 he bought a 360-acre former dairy farm in Castleton, Vermont, and five years later decided he should do something with the land. He solicited help from Win Way, a highly regarded agronomist with the extension service at the University. Win Way suggested that he grow beans, a crop once widely cultivated in now-saccharific Vermont. Indeed, Way himself had grown 22 acres of 'Soldier' beans in the 1960s, harvesting 10,000 pounds of beans and turning a tidy profit.

Guy A. Thomas

Guy Thomas likes challenges. He had never before grown anything on a large scale and had no training in any phase of agriculture, botany, horticulture, or any other related discipline. In short, he didn't know beans about growing beans. But in 1975, at an auction swoop, Thomas became Vermont's largest grower of beans. He planted all of the suitable open land on his property in Castleton, plus some rented acreage near Burlington (about an hour's drive to the north)—sixty acres in all—to 'Pinto,' 'Red Kidney,' and 'Soldier.' The results were unexpected. It was a very wet fall in Vermont, and the yield from his fields was poor.

Thomas lost money. It proved to be money well lost, however, for he learned two invaluable lessons. He was really not all that crazy about growing beans for a living. Number 2: There wasn't a single bean in the market demanding that he did.

But he did want to expand the operation slightly. To do that he needed more capital than he had left from the bean-field misadventure. He went to the place where he had kept funds. True, he told the banker, he had almost no experience in the seed business, but he was young (not yet forty) and ambitious and energetic, and he was sure he could make a living in that field. The banker was not intimidated that Thomas had been out in the bean field too long. Thomas offered to kick his own boots. That, second, apparently, was a bit more daring, or hungry, than the first. He advanced Thomas a line of credit up to $21,000. Not much, but enough to cope and mail Vermont Bean Seed Company's beautiful 1977 catalog. Today that catalog is something of a collector's item. Like the first catalog it contained no color—which certainly set it apart from almost all other seed catalogs—but it included handsome pen-and-ink drawings of the bean variety, done by local artists. The cover pictures a funny, down-to-earth-looking country store in the large format, easy-to-read catalog listed nearly a hundred kinds of beans. Thom as bought many of his listings and fed them into a computer. He then mailed out 100,000 catalogs, a two-year's supply, to four hundred customers. For the first time, Thomas added a franking label on one side, labelled Vermont Cranberry, for instance; it had almost become extinct. It's a beautiful, long-looked-at, striped and purple, and one of the sweetest tasting I know.

The company now has squelched away the maw of the names, addresses and buying histories of more than 85,000 customers. Thomas now sends out larger lists in this country, and several foreign countries as well. New York has the lead for the export business, customers, followed closely by Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California. Despite the Yankee doolee, 5,000 persons in all responded to the ad, and the Vermont Bean Seed Company sold $11,000 worth of business. The light in Thomas's brain took on a warm, steady glow. "This could be a very nice little business," he thought.

None of the beans sold by Vermont Bean, one might be surprised to learn, are grown in Vermont. Most come from southern Idaho. It doesn't rain much there—about four inches a year, on the average. In Vermont, as Thomas learned, the bean can pour down in one autumn month than falls in an entire year in southern Idaho. If the plants become wet when the beans are drying, they get moldy and discolored. And if the bean is too humid when the seed house quickly discovers, it's that gardeners don't buy seeds a second time if they got the first time were moldy and discolored. Of course, most plants need more than four years. In the bean fields of southern Idaho, most of it arrives via pipes, and during the critical period before the harvest water is allowed to touch the beans. The 1982 catalog of Vermont Bean Seed lists seventy-two cultivars of beans. There are five for no other seed company in this country carries, plus several other old ones that are still difficult for home gardeners to find. How did Thomas find them? He telephoned a few commercial seed growers and asked if they had any old bean cultivars on hand. Many, it turned out, did.

"What I want to do," he says, "is repopularize some of those old varieties that, for some reason, have lost ground with the modern public. A lot of them were excellent beans—good yields, good taste, disease resistant. Like Vermont Cranberry, for instance; it had almost become extinct. It's a beautiful, long-looked-at, striped and purple, and one of the sweetest tasting I know." Thomas's campaign to restore the popularity of heirloom beans seems to be succeeding. Demand for Vermont Cranberry is now so heavy that the amount of seed an individual could purchase from Vermont Bean Seed Company is limited to two ounces.

Guy Thomas has another love besides beans—long-distance running. In 1978 he ran in the New York Marathon and placed tenth—not bad, considering there were 16,000 entrants. Bill Rodgers won the event, but Thomas came close to finishing the line just four minutes behind him. Thomas did equally well in the 1979 and 1980 New York Marathons.
York Marathons. He did not compete in 1981, however. He did not have time. The "little, part-time" business had grown some. Vermont Bean Seed Company mailed out close to half a million catalogs and did more than a million dollars' worth of business that year. These days, Thomas contemplates himself with jogging to and from the barn.

As for John Withee, he now has time enough to consume, rather than merely pursue, his great romance. He was able to complete a book about beans that he had started putting together back in 1976, before Wainan Associates began threatening to overwhelm him. The closets of the Withee home hold clothes again, which pleases Mrs. Withee. Letters from bean lovers around the world are now answered fairly promptly. And, having planted 230 cultivars of beans in his garden in 1981, Withee's plants call for some 270 in 1982.

It is no surprise that Withee is an expert on growing beans. "The most important thing here in New England," he says, "is not to be around with the low end of the temperature range." He explains that, while the soil must warm to at least 50 degrees Fahrenheit before beans will start to grow, they won't do really well until the soil temperature hits 60 degrees. He considers 65 degrees the ideal bean-planting temperature. "It is no news to old gardeners," he writes, "that beans planted early in open ground will often not show flowers one day earlier than beans planted two weeks later, when conditions were better."

Because he deals with many beans that come from warmer climates and require a growing season that is longer than New England's, Withee gains a few days by what he calls "presprouting." He does this by washing the seeds and then soaking them in tepid water for a few hours until they swell. Then he places them on a single layer of moist paper towel. He covers the seeds with another layer of moist paper towel, places them in a plastic bag in order to retain the moisture, and holds it in a spot where the temperature will stay between 70 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit. When the radicle (root) first appears, the seedlings can be transplanted in the garden. The soil must be kept moist for several weeks. Withee often plants a seed of scarce, valuable bean cultivars in peat pots, then transplants them when conditions improve. Or he will simply roll up the moist towel and put them in the refrigerator, where the low temperature stops all growth. When soil temperature reaches an acceptable level, he takes the seeds out of the refrigerator, allows them to warm gradually, and plants them. By planting only the beans that have sprouted he gets a 100 percent stand with no skips.

One of the beans listed in Withee's latest annual catalog, which was published in 1980, is called 'King Tut.' It is a white runner bean, fairly large, not too distinguishably looking. But it has an enchanting history. In 1922, the fabled tomb of King Tutankhamen was opened. Among all the golden treasures were some large, white bean seeds. An archaeologist took the seeds back to England, where his gardeners grew them. Amazingly, they grew and produced seed. Now, the gardener, the story goes, happened to be a friend of a woman who had since gone to live in Maine, in Lewiston, and he sent her some of the seeds. She planted them, and they produced seed. John Withee heard about the beans and wrote to her. She sent him some of the seeds. Withee grew them, and they are now listed in his catalog.

Withee smiles as he tells the story. "Of course, he says, "the whole thing is highly dubious. Number one, let's suppose the original seeds did come out of the tomb. How did they get there? There is no evidence that they were placed there with King Tut and remained viable for five thousand years. And then there is the clincher for me—that type of bean just wasn't grown in Egypt at the time. The seeds could have been brought into the tomb just a few years ago, for this reason. I've not been able to keep seeds viable more than six years, and even under ideal storage conditions, the limit seems to be about ten. Still, it's a fascinating story."

He adds, after a pause, "The point is that seeds will die out. If you don't keep it planted, a particular variety can disappear from the face of the earth forever, a terrible thing."

But there's more to it than simply keeping a particular cultivar extant, Withee emphasizes. Last fall he went to Arizona to attend a conference sponsored by the Meals for Millions Foundation, with support from the National Sharecropers' Fund. There he says, a very important point was made: "What we need to do is not just preserve all these different varieties of beans that have played such a vital part in the nutritional history of man, but keep them growing, for human consumption, in the areas in which the variety first appeared. That's where they do best. After all, the varieties survived not because of people like me but because they prospered naturally and provided good food for the local population."

Guy Thomas, one suspect, would heartily concur. W

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