Please forgive the tardiness of this first issue of the bean lover's digest, intended initially for early March. The Wanigan is planned as an information-gathering service for both those "who don't know beans" about beans, and those "who haven't heard beans" about the subject of late. Diligent reading and correspondence will support my long time appetite for the subject in all stages of its production and consumption.

We can join the Iris, African Violet and other specialists societies in pursuing a single interest, and there is much to digest. Bean experts in the fields of nutrition, breeding, marketing, culture, etc. publish over 200 reports per month. This newsletter will attempt to excerpt information from such papers without prejudice and certainly without great insight, but with enthusiasm. In concession to brevity, sources will not be stressed, but will be available on request.

So much has been bandied about so often regarding the wonderful ability of beans to thrive in soils having low nitrogen levels, even to their ability to help other crops planted among beans. Well, here is the lowdown from an authority.

The key word is Rhizobia, a bacteria. Sometimes it is naturally in soils, but generally we inoculate seed with it before planting, just to be sure. The bacteria clinging to the seed infect seedling roots as they emerge. Once inside the root they stimulate the growth of nodules or swellings, then multiply by the millions inside these nodules. As the bacteria develop, they draw nitrogen gas from the air and convert it into chemical forms available to plants. The plant roots supply water and nutrients to the bacteria inside, and both live together happily.

That is fine for the bean plant, but it seems that the greatest aid to other plants in the vicinity of bean roots will not be available until the following crop year - if - the bean plants are not pulled. Yanking out the nodules will help only the compost.

Another recent finding indicates that a low nitrogen soil produces a lower value protein in the bean seed. An excess of nitrogen fertilizer does not raise the protein beyond inherent levels, but prudence dictates giving aid to the nodules. The old time fertilizer mix of 5-8-7 was right on target.

How about this from an old news clipping? A biochemist has found a protein from the uncooked kidney bean which inhibits the body's ability to use glucose. Mice, when fed the powder sprinkled on food, could overeat without putting on fat.

Put another shaker on the table: salt, pepper and "skinny powder"! No word yet from the F.D.A.
THINGS YOU KNEW BUT FORGOT TO TELL YOUR NEIGHBORS:

Our common beans (Phaseolus) were being grown in America long before Europeans found the country and the beans, which were unlike their own beans (Vicia faba). Returning explorers soon had Phaseolus pretty well disseminated throughout Europe. Later, during colonial times, some of the new settlers from Germany brought along what they considered their native beans, a variety called Forellen, which is very probably the one we call Jacob's Cattle. Later still, plant historians found an identically marked bean in Mexico, having been long grown by natives of the highlands of that country.

Could a bean have travelled from Mexico, to Spain, to Germany and back to America? Probably it did just that, along with other early varieties such as 1000 to 1, Caseknife and Cranberry.

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Here's a tip for those eager to get in a real early row of beans. Warm the soil before planting, using sun power. As you know, bean seed often fails to sprout in a soil temperature below 60 F. Limas need 65 F. All that's needed is a mini greenhouse, or "cloche," placed over the row for a period of weeks prior to normal planting time.

Place a 3' strip of black mulching plastic along the row to absorb the sun's heat. Over this stick low arches of wood or wire at 4 or 5 foot spacings along the row, across the black plastic. Roll out some clear polyethylene film wide enough to cover the bows and long enough to anchor firmly at each end. Tie strings over the film at each bow or arch to keep wind from ballooning it. This mini greenhouse will heat rapidly.

Test soil temperature at a 3" depth and when at 60 F remove the black plastic (or punch and plant beans through slits), but leave the clear film in place. When sprouted, regulate heat by lifting the sides of the cloche. The strings over the bows will hold the film on windy days.

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LET'S TRY LIMAS

If you try this recipe, perhaps you will decide to include bush or pole limas in your garden this year.

In the morning rinse and put to soak one pound of dry regular or baby lima beans. In the early afternoon bring them to a boil, uncovered. Cut heat a bit and cook for 5 to 10 minutes, during which time you prepare the rest:

Peel a large onion and stick with a dozen whole cloves. Mix:

½ cup molasses
¼ cup ketchup
1 tsp. salt
2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

Butter a casserole, lay in 4 strips of bacon. Drop in the cloved onion. Mix the sauce with limas and pour into casserole. Stick in a bay leaf and bake, covered, in a 300 F oven, adding water if needed until supper time. Allow 3 hours if you eat early.

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THE SHORT AND THE LONG OF IT

Many bean lovers have succumbed to the fairly recent advice giving a shortcut method of preparing a pot of baked beans. That is, putting dry beans in water, bringing to a quick 2 minute boil, then resting, simmering, etc. (USDA leaflet)

Well, an article in a journal of chemistry in 1959 indicated that "heating at cooking temperatures of relatively dry protein and carbohydrate mixtures causes indigestible complexes to form."

MORAL: soak overnight, or at least a few hours.