



<< HOME << See More Everyday Mysteries>> << Ask a Question >>

Find in Everyday Mysteries Pages

Question:

Are black-eyed peas really peas?

Answer:

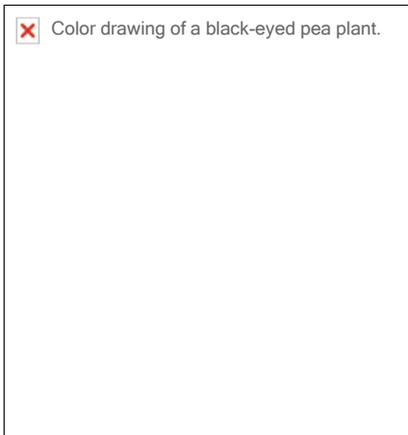
No.

Black-eyed peas (*Vigna unguiculata*) are a variety of the cowpea and are part of the family of beans & peas (*Leguminosae* or *Fabaceae* in the USA). Although called a pea, it is actually a bean. Both peas and beans are legumes, and both have edible seeds and pods. According to the *Penguin Companion to Food*, bean is a "term loosely applied to any legume whose seeds or pods are eaten, not classed separately as a pea or lentil." Beans traditionally were in the genus *Phaseolus*, but now some of the species, including the black-eyed pea, are in the genus *Vigna*. Peas are in the genus *Pisum*.

The common names of beans and peas are not consistent; other legumes popularly called "peas" are the butterfly pea (*Clitoria ternatea*), the chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), pigeon peas (*Cajanus cajan*), and the winged pea (*Lotus tetragonolobus*). As legumes they are extremely nourishing vegetables, both to people and to the soil. They are able to fix nitrogen, meaning nitrogen from the air is taken in by the plant and bacteria living in the roots convert it to a useable plant nutrient. Because of this process, nitrogen-fixing plants improve soil quality by adding nutrients back into the soil.

Fun Facts about black-eyed peas:

- Cultivated since pre-historic times in China and India, they are related to the mung bean. The ancient Greeks and Romans preferred them to chickpeas.
- Brought to the West Indies from West Africa by slaves, by earliest records in 1674.
- Originally used as food for livestock, they became a staple of the slaves' diet. During the Civil War, black-eyed peas (field peas) and corn were thus ignored by Sherman's troops. Left behind in the fields, they became important food for the Confederate South.
- In the American South, eating black-eyed peas and greens (such as collards) on New Year's Day is considered good luck: the peas symbolize coins and the greens symbolize paper money.
- They are a key ingredient in Hoppin' John (peas, rice and pork) and part of African-American "soul food."
- Originally called *mogette* (French for nun). The black eye in the center of the bean (where it attaches to the pod) reminded some of a nun's head attire.



[Black-eyed pea plant.](#) Thomas Jefferson praised it as "... very productive, excellent food for man and beast." From the National Park Service Web site.



[Examples of *Vigna unguiculata* blooms.](#)

Related Web Sites

DISCLAIMER

National Plant Germplasm System (USDA/ARS) Web site.

- [Peas, Black-Eyed](#) - USDA fact sheet on storage, cooking, nutritional facts, and a couple of recipes. PDF - 209KB
- [African-American Registry: "Soul Food" – a Brief History!](#) - Includes long list of ingredients and dishes commonly associated with soul food.
- [B is for Black-Eyed Peas \(Univ. of Calif., Cooperative Extension Alameda Co.\)](#) - Activities for children using black-eyed peas illustrating math and diversity concepts.
- [Black-Eyed Pea Pests Bear Watching](#) - Insect pests and plant disease are threats to commercial growers.



[Vigna unguiculata \(L.\) Walp. - blackeyed pea.](#)
National Resources Conservation Service, USDA Web site.

Further Reading

WWW.LOC.GOV

- Aguiar, J. L., and others. Factor for estimating nitrogen contribution of cowpea as a cover crop. *Journal of agronomy & crop science*, v. 186, May 15, 2001: 145-149.
- Banks-Payne, Ruby. *Ruby's low-fat soul food cookbook*. Chicago, Ill., Contemporary Books, c1996. 175 p.
- Berry, Elizabeth, and Florence Fabricant. *Elizabeth Berry's great bean book*. Berkeley, Calif., Ten Speed Press, c1999. 129 p.
- Davidson, Alan. *The Penguin companion to food*. New York, Penguin Reference, 2002. 1072 p.
- Ferguson, Sheila. *Soul food: classic cuisine from the deep South*. New York, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989. 208 p.
- Green, Aliza. *The bean bible: a legumaniac's guide to lentils, peas, and every edible bean on the planet!* Philadelphia, PA Running Press Book Publishers, c2000. 338 p.
- Hayes, Isaac. *Cooking with heart & soul*. New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, c2000. 222 p.
- Lal, Rattan. Managing the soils of Sub-Saharan Africa. *Science*, v. 236, May 29, 1987: 1069-1076.
- Lewis, Edna, and Scott Peacock. *The gift of Southern cooking; recipes and revelations from two great Southern cooks*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 332 p.
- Mariani, John F. *The Encyclopedia of American food and drink*. New York, Lebhar-Friendman Books, 1999. 380 p.
- *Miss Sadie's southern cooking: classic southern recipes from truly southern families*. Highland Village, Tex., Cookbook Resources, c2005. 288 p.
- White, Joyce Adams. *Soul food: recipes and reflections from African-American churches*. New York, HarperCollinsPublishers, 1998. 355 p.
- Withee, John E. *Growing and cooking beans*. Dublin, N.H., Yankee, 1980. 143 p.



[Vigna unguiculata pods.](#) National Plant Germplasm System (USDA/ARS) Web site.



[E & A Soul Food Restaurant, 82 Straight Street, Paterson, New Jersey.](#) American Memory, Library of Congress.



For more print resources...
Search on "Beans," "Cowpea," "Cookery--Southern States," "Cookery, American--Southern style," or "African American cookery in the [Library of Congress Online Catalog](#).



[Top of Page](#)

[<< HOME](#)

[<< See More Everyday Mysteries>>](#)

[<< Ask a Question >>](#)