

Recently, I was reminded of the children's story "Jack and the Beanstalk." While Rita and I were in Tilden, Nebraska, and strolling through our sister-in-law's yard, we noticed a most interesting beanstalk growing on her arbor. Unlike Jack's beanstalk, that was grown from magic beans and reached high into the fabled giants home, this particular beanstalk wasn't magic, but it reached high on the arbor and was adorned with beautiful majestic flowers. It was obvious; this beanstalk was being grown for its ornamental value. Interestingly, however, this beanstalk could have been grown for its food value — more about that feature later.



I am referring to the plant *Lablab purpureus*, more commonly called purple hyacinth bean. With shades of purple in the leaves, stems, flowers and showy seedpods, purple hyacinth bean is undeniably eye-catching. This beanstalk is a vigorous grower and deemed a popular choice for quick cover. This ornamental

plant is a showy, annual, climbing beanstalk with beautiful green and wine-colored foliage adorned with large, spiked clusters of one-inch, red-violet, pea-like blossoms. Following the showy blossoms, shiny, leather-like, magenta seedpods develop that are two to three inches long. The purple pods form shortly after the flowers fade. Although deemed somewhat slow to bloom, once the flowering begins, one should see a continual



display of color. Purple hyacinth bean flowers need no deadheading! Hyacinth bean vines can easily grow ten to fifteen feet in one season and are perfect for trellises, arbors, walls or fences.

In USDA Zones 10 and warmer, the purple hyacinth bean grows as a perennial; however, in Nebraska, it grows as an annual. Although I have never done so, I did read that in warm greenhouse conditions and given enough light, this plant will continue to flower indoors as a houseplant.

Plants growing outdoors in Nebraska may reseed if the pods are left outdoors over winter. It is also very easy to collect the dried seeds at the end of the season and save them to plant the following growing season.

One can easily start purple hyacinth bean from seed. Since this plant generally grows upward, it utilizes a minimum amount of garden space. The seeds are very hard and soaking them overnight before planting improves germination. When planting directly outdoors, one should wait until all danger of frost has passed. Outdoor temperatures should reach a constant 50° F., before direct planting. For optimum blooming, choose a site receiving full sun. Purple hyacinth beans will grow in partial shade but will produce fewer blossoms. Furthermore, if planted in shade, the risk of fungal disease is higher.

Plant seeds one to two inches deep in the soil. The seeds should germinate within two to three weeks. Once germinated, these non-magical beans grow at a phenomenal rate.

Earlier, I mentioned that the plant has an edible value. Hyacinth bean pods and seeds may be eaten, but extreme caution must be taken. Both the pod and bean are somewhat toxic, containing *Cyanogenic glycoside*. If either the pod or seed is eaten raw, it can cause weakness, vomiting, labored breathing and convulsions. If, however, the pods and seeds are thoroughly boiled and the water changed several times, they do become safe to eat. I suggest not taking the risk.

It would be fun to get ahold of some magic bean seeds as Jack did in that famous children's story "Jack and the Beanstalk" but we all know such is

not possible. What is possible, however, is getting and planting some bean seeds from the plant *Lablab purpureus*, more commonly called purple hyacinth bean. Even though they may not be magic, be prepared for a majestic show of color and beauty!