

Luscious Lentils & Other Lovable Little Legumes

All lentils are descendants of the natives of the Middle East. But as they traveled, they adapted to the particular soils and climates of their adopted homes, with varieties becoming quite distinctive. Of course lentils are renowned in soups and stews, but they're also good cold in salads, cooked in a stew or sauce to be served over grains, pureed to be part of dips, or mashed to add textural heft, flavor, and protein to various veggie burgers and loaves. As you'd expect from such travelers, lentils work well with a range of flavorings: Mediterranean, North African, Indian. Though they can be used interchangeably, here are a few notes on the varieties.

I've also included several quick-cooking legumes that are technically peas, not lentils.

NAME	COOKING NOTES	LOCALE
Brown lentil BROWNISH GREEN, TINY DISC	Used in classic American lentil soups; will work well in any lentil recipe. Hold their own with strong, wintery flavors: wild rice, full-flavored mushrooms. Good in croquettes and burgers because they easily cook to mushiness. Cook tender in 30 to 45 minutes.	Raised in American Northwest; found in typical supermarkets.
Black or Beluga lentil NAMED FOR ITS PASSING RESEMBLANCE TO CAVIAR, ABOUT THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF BLACK PEPPERCORNS	Small and round, these cook in 20 to 30 minutes and have a nice nutty flavor. They hold their shape well and become shiny black when cooked. Visually striking in salads or with pale grains. Cooked separately and stirred in at the last, they are an excellent addition to risottos, both tasty and attractive.	Raised in Idaho; available at specialty foods markets and online through Purcell Mountain Farms and Indian Harvest.
Spanish or Pardina lentil ABOUT A THIRD THE SIZE OF A CONVENTIONAL BROWN LENTIL	These tiny discs hold their shape nicely when cooked. Their flavor is slightly richer than that of brown lentils, and they hold up nicely with tomato sauces and curry spices, but also work well anywhere you'd use brown lentils. They cook in 25 to 35 minutes.	They used to be imported from Spain but are now grown in Idaho and the American Northwest, too. Available at specialty foods markets and online through Purcell Mountain Farms and Indian Harvest.

★ All cooking times are approximate. The older the bean is, the longer it will take to cook. Always taste for tenderness about three-quarters of the way through the shorter suggested time when using a conventional pot or slow-cooker. When using a pressure cooker, stop the cooking at the earlier end of the cooking range, let pressure release gradually, open, and taste. If not tender, reseal the lid and bring it back up to high pressure for the remaining time.

NAME	COOKING NOTES	LOCALE
<p>Green lentil (LENTILES DU PUY)</p>	<p>Slightly smaller than brown lentils, and even more flavorful than the domestics. They also cook tender in 30 to 45 minutes.</p>	<p>Until recently they were imported from France, where they are grown in volcanic soil, but they're now grown in Idaho, too. Available at specialty foods markets and online through Purcell Mountain Farms and Indian Harvest.</p>
<p>Red lentil A STUNNING, VIBRANT CORAL ORANGE WHICH MUTES TO A STILL-PRETTY GOLDEN YELLOW WITH COOKING</p>	<p>These are actually split, skinned brown lentils. They cook up quickly into a tender and indistinct mass. Try them anywhere you'd use split peas, or in any dahl, or in veggie burgers. Their texture rules them out for salads. They'll cook in 20 to 25 minutes, and are relatively low in gas-forming compounds.</p>	<p>A native of the Middle East and widely grown in India as well as the American Northwest. Available at Indian, Middle Eastern, and specialty foods markets; online through Purcell Mountain Farms.</p>
<p>Split pea PALE GREEN DISC, SKINLESS AND THIN (BECAUSE IT IS SPLIT)</p>	<p>A variety of yellow or green peas, grown for drying (distinct from garden peas, which are intended to be eaten fresh). Halved down the natural split in the center. Split peas cook in a quick 30 to 40 minutes, and are relatively low in gas-forming compounds. Of course they're a classic and so-good legume for soup. Because they, too, cook to mushiness, their texture rules them out for salads.</p>	<p>A native of the Middle East and widely grown in India as well as the American Northwest. Available at many supermarkets, as well as at Indian, Middle Eastern, and specialty foods markets; online through Purcell Mountain Farms.</p>
<p>Yellow split pea SLIM YELLOW DISC</p>	<p>Used much more often in India than in America as the basis for soupy, spicy, pleasing dahl, an all-purpose Indian dish of a thousand regional variations. Bright in color, they seem to suggest bright, spicy flavorings—they're also often part of Moroccan and Tunisian tagines to accompany couscous, but you can swap green for yellow or yellow for green in any recipe, Eastern or Western. Cooking time's 30 to 40 minutes. Because they, too, cook to mushiness, their texture rules them out for salads.</p>	<p>A native of the Middle East and widely grown in India as well as the American Northwest. Available at many supermarkets, as well as at Indian, Middle Eastern, and specialty foods markets; online through Purcell Mountain Farms.</p>

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Yields for virtually all dried beans: 1 cup dried beans, peas, or lentils equals 2¼ to 2½ cups cooked.