Cowpea

**Family:** Fabaceae  
**Subfamily:** Faboideae  
**Genus & species:** Vigna unguiculata  
**Common names:** Cowpea, black-eyed pea, black-eyed bean, crowder pea, southern pea, field pea, China bean

**Biogeography:**

There is some debate about the geographical origin of cowpeas. Some authorities feel that cowpeas originated either in the southern Sahel of north-central Africa or in Ethiopia, and then spread to Asia and the Mediterranean by way of Egypt. Another view is that they originated in India and were introduced into Africa some 2,000 to 3,500 years ago. From West Africa, they made their way to the Caribbean and then to North America with the slave trade.

Cowpeas are now grown widely in savannah regions of the tropics and sub-tropics, especially in western and central African countries. They are also cultivated extensively in California, the southeastern United States and Puerto Rico. Nigeria is currently the world’s largest cowpea producer accounting for about 22% of total production, followed by Brazil, which produces around 10%.

**Botanical features:**

Cowpea is an annual herbaceous legume that can reach more than 80 cm in height. Some varieties grow upright, while others have procumbent stems, often tinged with purple, that trail along ground. Large dark green trifoliate leaves provide a good ground cover that helps conserve soil moisture. The plant has a deep taproot with numerous spreading lateral roots that help stabilise the soil.

The flowers occur in alternate pairs and range in colour from dull white to yellow or lavender. They open in the early morning, close by about midday and then wilt and die.

Depending on the specific cultivar, the pods can be curved, straight or even coiled, and the seeds may be solid colours (red, black, brown, tan or white) or speckled, spotted, or marbled. The seeds vary in shape from kidney-shaped to round, depending on how tightly packed they are in the pod. Two of the most well known varieties are ‘Black-eyed’ (white with a black spot where the seed was attached to the pod) and ‘Crowder’ (so-called because the seeds are crowded together in the pods).

**General:**

Cowpeas were considered sacred by the Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups of Nigeria and were used to ward off evil and cure sick children.
In the southeastern United States, the black-eyed variety are cooked with ham or salt pork and served with rice and greens on New Year’s Day. The dish is called ‘Hoppin John’ and is said to bring good luck in the coming year.

Uses:

Cowpeas are a major food staple in many parts of Africa where every part of the plant is eaten. Green seeds are roasted and used like peanuts. Dried seeds may be boiled and used in soups or stews, or ground and made into cakes. Scorched seeds are sometimes used as a coffee substitute. Immature pods are steamed or boiled and eaten whole. The green leaves are boiled and eaten like spinach, while in parts of Sudan and Ethiopia the roots are roasted and eaten.

One variety, called the ‘yard long bean,’ has been used in China since prehistoric times. The extremely long pods are picked young and steamed or stir-fried.

Cowpeas are drought tolerant and will grow on poor soils, so they are good for use as green manure to help enrich the soil with nitrogen. They are often planted together with sorghum, millet or maize, or used in crop rotation with cereals. They also provide high-protein pasturage for pigs and cattle, as well as hay and silage (usually mixed with corn or sorghum).

Human health benefits & concerns:

Cowpeas contain around 25% protein and are low in fat. As with most legumes, they are poor in some of the sulphur-containing amino acids needed for a complete protein; however, the amino acids in cowpeas are complemented by those found in cereal grains. They are also an excellent source of fibre, calcium, folic acid and vitamin A.

References:

http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/publications/vegetabletravelers/cowpeas.html
http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/thscrip/print.pl?file=2004080500640200.htm&date=2004/08/05/ &prd=mp&
http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/nexus/Vigna_unguiculata_nex.html
http://www.lita.org/crop/cowpea.htm