



Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition • FSN Forum

TOPIC NOTE

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➤ www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/pulses

Pulses are praised for their health, environmental and economic benefits. How can their full potential be tapped?



2016
INTERNATIONAL
YEAR OF PULSES

Pulses are important food crops that can play a major role in addressing global food security and environmental challenges, as well as contribute to healthy diets.

In recognition of the contributions that pulses can make to human well-being and to the environment, the UN General Assembly declared **2016 as the International Year of Pulses**.

However, most people do not know **what exactly pulses are**:

According to FAO (1994),ⁱ pulses, a subgroup of legumes, are crop plant members of the *Leguminosae* family (commonly known as the pea family) that produce edible seeds, which are used for human and animal consumption. Only legumes harvested for dry grain are classified as pulses. For example, grain legumes used mainly for oil production, such as soybean (*Glycine max* [L.] Merr.), are not considered pulses. Likewise, legumes used for sowing purposes (e.g. *Medicago sativa* L.) or as vegetables are not considered pulses.

Pulses are a critical and inexpensive source of plant-based proteins, vitamins and minerals for people around the globe. They have a low fat content, contain zero cholesterol, and are a significant source of dietary fibre. Moreover, they contain no gluten and are rich in minerals and B vitamins, all of which are important for a healthy life.

From an agricultural point of view, multiple cropping systems that include pulses enhance soil fertility, improve yields, and contribute to a more sustainable food system. It is particularly noteworthy that pulses have a very low water footprint compared with other protein sources, and can be grown in very poor soils where other crops cannot be cultivated. Crop residues of pulses, and legumes in general, can also be used as animal fodder, thus increasing the quality of the animal diet.

Furthermore, pulses can play an important role in climate change adaptation, since they have a broad genetic diversity from which climate-resilient varieties can be selected and/or bred.

Pulses form part of the local cuisine in many parts of the world and are a highly traded commodity. However, despite the benefits highlighted above, their consumption at an individual level has seen a slow but steady decline, and production has not increased at the same rate as other commodities such as cereals. North Africa is the only region that has experienced any growth (only slight growth, in fact) in individual consumption.

Recognizing the enormous potential of these crops, the International Year of Pulses aims to raise awareness on the beneficial impact they can have on food security, nutrition and the environment; to encourage an increase in their production; and to highlight the need for enhanced investment in research and development and in extension services.

It also aims to increase the adoption of pulses as a central part of people's meals around the globe, as well as providing information on how to best prepare and consume them.

In order to make the International Year of Pulses truly inclusive and to gather as much information as possible on the use of these remarkable plants, we would like to invite you to contribute your experience and knowledge, in particular around the following questions:

- **Some countries produce large amounts of pulses, but these are not a part of their respective diets. How can the use of pulses be increased in communities where these crops do not play an important role in the local cuisine/traditional meals?**
- **Do you have any examples on how the consumption of pulses contributes to household food security and nutrition in your community or country, which may be useful in different contexts?**
- **What are the main challenges that farmers in your country face with regard to the production of pulses? How should these be addressed?**
- **Are you aware of any research or studies on the role of pulses in climate change adaptation or mitigation? Please share them with us.**
- **The International Year of Pulses also includes a call for recipes to provide ideas and inspiration on how to consume these nutritious seeds. Would you like to share yours?**

Your suggestions, case studies and references will be used to produce fact sheets and briefs to circulate at events and initiatives carried out at regional and country levels during the International Year of Pulses.

International Year of Pulses Secretariat

ⁱ FAO. 1994. Definition and classification commodities, 4. Pulses and derived products (available at <http://www.fao.org/es/faodef/fdef04e.htm>).