

THE SIXTY-YEAR TREND IN VEGETABLE SEED PRICES

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Many seedsmen have complained that vegetable seed prices have not risen as fast as other prices and that in many cases the seed prices are no higher now than they were fifty or sixty years ago. The Library of the Vegetable Crops Department contains an extensive collection of vegetable seed catalogues, so it was decided to search through these catalogues to determine, if possible, what the price trend has been.

A catalogue for the vegetable grower more sharply mirrors the price changes than does a catalogue for the home gardener. A wholesale catalogue would probably have been even more responsive to price changes, but none was available. Therefore, the Burpee "Blue List" was used, because it was for the grower and because our file in this catalogue is more complete. In order to extend the time back to 1900 and to fill in the gaps, W. Atlee Burpee III agreed to send us several of their file copy "Blue Lists." Thus we were able to consult 26 catalogues dating from 1900 to 1961, including the years of high prices and of low prices and yearly from 1951 on.

After considerable study we found varieties of each of the major kinds of vegetables that were in all catalogues from 1900 to 1961. A few additional varieties were also included where predecessor varieties existed in the earlier catalogues. The number of varieties used to determine the average price for each kind of seed reported here varied from 2 to 14. The varieties used for each kind are listed as an addendum to this paper. The yearly price for each kind was obtained by averaging the lowest prices quoted for the different varieties used. The lowest prices, of course, were for the largest quantities and are all figured on a per pound basis.

The average prices for the 22 kinds of vegetable seeds for the different years are given in Table 1. In Figure 1, the average prices for four traditional groupings of the kinds are compared to the BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) Wholesale Price Index for all commodities. The curves are plotted on a semilog graph, so that, regardless of the actual prices, the magnitudes of price changes are comparable. The groups were:

Large Seed:	Peas, Snap Beans, Lima Beans, Sweet Corn
Small Seed:	Beet, Carrot, Endive, Lettuce, Parsley, Onion
Vine Seed:	Cucumber, Muskmelon, Squash, Pumpkin, Watermelon
Solanaceous Seed:	Eggplant, Pepper, Tomato

The average price for each group is a weighted average, using the USDA Report of the 1954-1958 average of pounds of seeds produced for each kind as its factor. In Figure 2, the average prices between 1920 and 1961 for 11 kinds of seeds are given. Since these prices are also on a semilog graph, again the magnitudes of the changes are comparable regardless of the numerical price.

Discussion

The most striking conclusion to be drawn from the table and the graphs is that vegetable seed prices have very closely followed the wholesale prices of all commodities as measured by the BLS Index. According to the BLS Index commodity prices tripled between 1900 and 1920, more than halved between 1920 and 1932, and tripled again between 1932 and 1961 for a net increase in 1961 of almost four times the 1900 prices. This is essentially the same pattern the Large Seed, Small Seed, Vine Seed, and Solanaceous Seed groups have followed. The prices for the large seed group have not yet reached the peak attained in 1920, while the prices of the vine seed group have considerably exceeded the 1920 peak and are over four times the 1900 prices.

As with any long-term study, various factors enter into the price picture that are difficult to translate into a few curves or columns of figures. The relative importance of the varieties used in the averages change, and many important present-day varieties are left out, because they are of recent introduction. Frequently the newer varieties sell at higher prices than the older ones; thus, the averages are understating the rise in prices rather than overstating it. This is particularly true where hybrids have become important, as in Sweet Corn and Onions, since no hybrid variety has been in use long enough to be included in this sixty-year list.

The price received is only a part of the whole question of vegetable seed economics. Since World War II there has been a steady increase in yield per acre, thus probably allowing contract prices to increase at a slower rate. Data on this price factor have not been available to us, however. If the spread between contract price and selling price is increased, it must also be acknowledged that costs of services to the purchaser have also increased, including milling for cleaner and higher germinating seed and packaging in consumer-size packages, which are frequently moisture-resistant and more expensive.

The cry that the price of vegetable seeds has not kept pace with the price of other commodities is not valid. However, this is only one of several factors involved in whether the seed business is making money. It certainly is not an argument against selling higher quality seed at higher prices.

Addendum

The varieties used in establishing the average prices for the different kinds of vegetable seeds are as follows:

Bean, Snap (14): Bountiful, Giant Stringless, (Resistant) Black Valentine, Burpee's Stringless Green-Pod, Burpee's Brittle Wax, Pencil Pod Wax, Rustproof Golden Wax, Surecrop Stringless Wax, Golden Cluster Wax, Horticultural, Kentucky Wonder, Kentucky Wonder Wax, Lazy Wife.

Bean, Lima (6): Burpee's Improved, Burpee's Fordhook, Henderson Bush, Carolina, Burpee's Giant Podded, King of the Garden.

Beet, Garden (6): Burpee's Improved Blood Turnip, Crosby's Egyptian, Detroit Dark Red, Extra Early Flat Egyptian, Burpee's Red Ball, Burpee's Extra Early.

Cabbage (11): Charleston or Large Wakefield, Copenhagen Market, Early Jersey Wakefield, Burpee's Allhead Early, All Seasons, Early Flat Dutch, Enkhuizen Glory, Henderson's Succession, Danish Roundhead, Perfected Drumhead Savoy, Premium Flat Dutch.

Carrot (4): Chantenay, Oxheart, Danvers Half Long, Nantes Half Long.

Cauliflower (3): Early Snowball, Burpee's Dry Weather, Holland Erfurt, Improved.

Celery (2): Giant Pascal, Burpee's Golden Self-Blanching.

Corn, Sweet (5): Early Evergreen, Black Mexican, Country Gentleman, Stowell's Evergreen, Burpee's Golden Bantam.

Cucumber (7): Extra Early Green Prolific, Extra Early White Spine, Burpee's Fordhook Pickling, London Long Green, Davis' Perfect, Early Fortune, West India Gherkin.

Endive (3): Broad-Leaved Batavian, Green Curled, White Curled.

Lettuce (9): Big Boston, May King, Burpee's Iceberg, Hanson, Burpee's Wayahead, Black-Seeded Simpson, Early Prizehead, Grand Rapids, Paris White Cos.

Muskmelon (2): Burpee's Netted Gem, Honey Dew.

Onion (8): Yellow Globe Danvers, Southport Yellow Globe, Prizetaker, Red Wethersfield, Southport Red Globe, Australian Brown, Southport White Globe, White Portugal.

Parsley (3): Extra Curled Dwarf, Parsnip-Rooted, Plain.

Peas (8): Burpee's Blue Bantam, Little Marvel, Nott's Excelsior, Thomas Laxton, Alderman, Carter's Daisy, Potlatch, Alaska.

Pepper (5): Chinese Giant, Long Red Cayenne, Neapolitan, Ruby King, Tabasco.

Pumpkin (6): Big Tom, Genuine Mammoth, Golden Cushaw, Green Striped Cushaw, Large Cheeze, Small Sugar.

Radish (9): Burpee's Scarlet Button, Burpee's Rapid Red, Vick's Scarlet Globe, French Breakfast, White Icicle, White Strassburg, White Chinese, Long Black Spanish, Chinese Rose.

Squash (9): Cocozelle Bush, Early Golden Summer Crookneck, Early White Bush Scalloped, Burpee's Fordhook Zucchini, Boston Marrow, True Hubbard, Watted Hubbard, Red Hubbard, Golden Delicious.

Tomato (5): Bonny Best, Burpee's Matchless, Burpee's Sunnybrook Earliana, Ponderosa, Red Cherry.

Turnip (6): Purple-Top Strap Leaf, Early White Flat Dutch, Extra-Early Purple-Top Milan, Golden Ball, Seven Top, White Egg.

Watermelon (4): Florida Favorite, Burpee's Halbert Honey, Kleckley's Sweet, Tom Watson.

Table 1. Average Burpee's Blue List price per pound of 22 kinds of vegetable seed in different years between 1900 and 1961.

Year	Bean, Snap	Bean, Lima	Beet, Garden	Cabbage	Carrot	Cauliflower	Celery	Corn, Sweet	Cucumber	Endive	Lettuce	Muskmelon
1900	\$.12	\$.09	\$.34	\$2.03	\$.50	\$30.00	\$2.12	\$.05	\$.70	\$1.08	\$1.00	\$.65
1905	.12	.10	.58	1.96	.61	30.80	2.12	.10	1.20	1.03	1.10	.65
1908	.10	.11	.53	2.10	.61	30.80	2.45	.16	2.00	1.08	1.11	.65
1912	.11	.13	1.54	3.09	2.72	30.80	4.25	.09	1.25	1.08	1.17	.60
1917	.20	.15	1.18	2.59	1.38	29.30	4.62	.25	1.50	1.37	1.51	.60
1920	.26	.30	1.16	5.70	.92	36.20	4.62	.25	1.35	1.48	1.54	1.75
1921	.21	.26	.60	3.28	.60	22.70	4.00	.16	1.10	1.15	1.39	1.15
1925	.24	.27	.75	2.63	.90	28.00	6.00	.27	1.31	1.33	1.97	1.12
1932	.16	.20	.68	1.88	.69	23.30	3.75	.17	1.40	.88	.99	.89
1935	.12	.15	.67	1.52	.84	18.70	2.38	.22	1.60	.75	.86	.75
1936	.12	.13	.65	1.50	.71	16.30	2.50	.12	.89	.72	.79	.60
1940	.14	.15	.66	1.53	.78	17.30	2.92	.12	1.00	.72	.82	.82
1945	.20	.21	1.85	4.31	2.45	29.80	6.50	.22	2.25	1.60	2.06	2.12
1947	.24	.25	1.51	2.87	2.04	26.70	5.40	.18	2.17	1.45	1.84	2.18
1948	.28	.30	1.53	2.93	2.04	26.70	5.40	.18	2.17	1.57	1.84	2.18
1951	.30	.28	1.34	2.93	2.08	21.00	5.40	.23	2.03	1.57	1.94	2.18
1952	.32	.31	1.39	2.95	2.11	21.30	6.02	.25	2.14	1.72	2.06	2.28
1953	.32	.30	1.39	3.07	2.11	20.30	6.85	.26	2.14	1.75	2.06	2.28
1954	.32	.31	1.37	3.96	2.24	30.30	8.25	.26	2.20	2.00	2.23	2.75
1955	.31	.30	1.34	4.16	2.24	30.30	8.25	.26	2.15	2.00	2.15	2.62
1956	.34	.34	1.44	4.52	2.34	33.00	9.08	.27	2.25	2.25	2.40	2.92
1957	.34	.33	1.42	4.78	2.24	33.00	8.38	.27	2.18	2.20	2.31	2.88
1958	.35	.35	1.40	3.73	2.28	32.10	8.38	.28	2.22	2.20	2.37	3.25
1959	.35	.35	1.47	3.73	2.28	32.10	8.38	.30	2.22	2.20	2.37	3.25
1960	.35	.35	1.35	3.56	1.90	30.30	7.95	.34	2.15	2.30	2.31	3.45
1961	.37	.37	1.45	3.74	2.28	32.50	9.00	.38	2.15	2.43	2.34	3.60

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Table 1. (Continued)

Year	Onion	Parsley	Peas	Pepper	Pumpkin	Radish	Squash	Tomato	Turnip	Watermelon
1900	\$1.69	\$.37	\$.08	\$2.20	\$.59	\$.43	\$.48	\$2.40	\$.32	\$.48
1905	.92	.37	.13	3.00	.68	.48	.77	2.73	.39	.65
1908	2.14	.37	.12	3.70	.62	.61	.60	2.95	.40	.66
1912	1.84	1.00	.20	3.25	.66	.60	.79	3.15	.75	.75
1917	1.89	.67	.18	3.65	.95	.67	.88	3.40	.63	.69
1920	2.65	1.00	.37	5.50	1.32	1.28	1.81	6.07	1.18	.71
1921	1.63	.87	.34	5.81	1.21	.80	1.42	5.47	.72	.76
1925	1.74	.87	.23	3.99	.76	.81	.95	4.50	.59	.79
1932	1.56	.63	.16	3.96	.71	1.36	1.03	3.96	.44	.47
1935	2.41	.57	.15	3.25	.60	.54	.71	3.45	.42	.51
1936	1.98	.48	.13	3.00	.53	.52	.70	3.31	.38	.42
1940	1.41	.60	.12	3.08	.60	.54	.78	3.00	.36	.60
1945	6.16	1.18	.17	5.40	1.36	.93	1.66	6.77	.84	1.25
1947	4.68	1.20	.18	6.65	1.12	.88	1.71	6.93	.59	1.36
1948	4.59	1.23	.20	6.65	1.36	.89	1.71	6.69	1.18	1.36
1951	3.98	1.50	.21	6.45	1.36	.89	1.71	6.27	.98	1.36
1952	3.98	1.55	.23	6.78	1.42	.93	1.81	6.57	.98	1.41
1953	3.84	1.50	.23	6.91	1.50	.93	1.86	6.57	.96	1.41
1954	4.40	1.60	.23	7.40	1.58	1.04	2.34	7.88	.97	2.18
1955	4.31	1.60	.24	7.21	1.58	1.03	2.30	7.88	.97	2.12
1956	4.54	1.75	.27	7.73	1.74	1.08	2.56	8.29	1.02	2.22
1957	4.40	1.80	.27	7.75	1.68	1.09	2.55	7.72	1.02	2.20
1958	4.38	2.03	.27	8.12	1.73	1.12	2.55	7.72	1.02	2.20
1959	4.34	1.77	.27	8.12	1.73	1.12	2.55	7.72	1.02	2.20
1960	4.29	2.07	.29	9.12	1.95	1.07	2.48	7.71	1.15	2.25
1961	4.53	1.97	.28	9.12	2.05	1.06	2.51	7.88	1.15	2.25

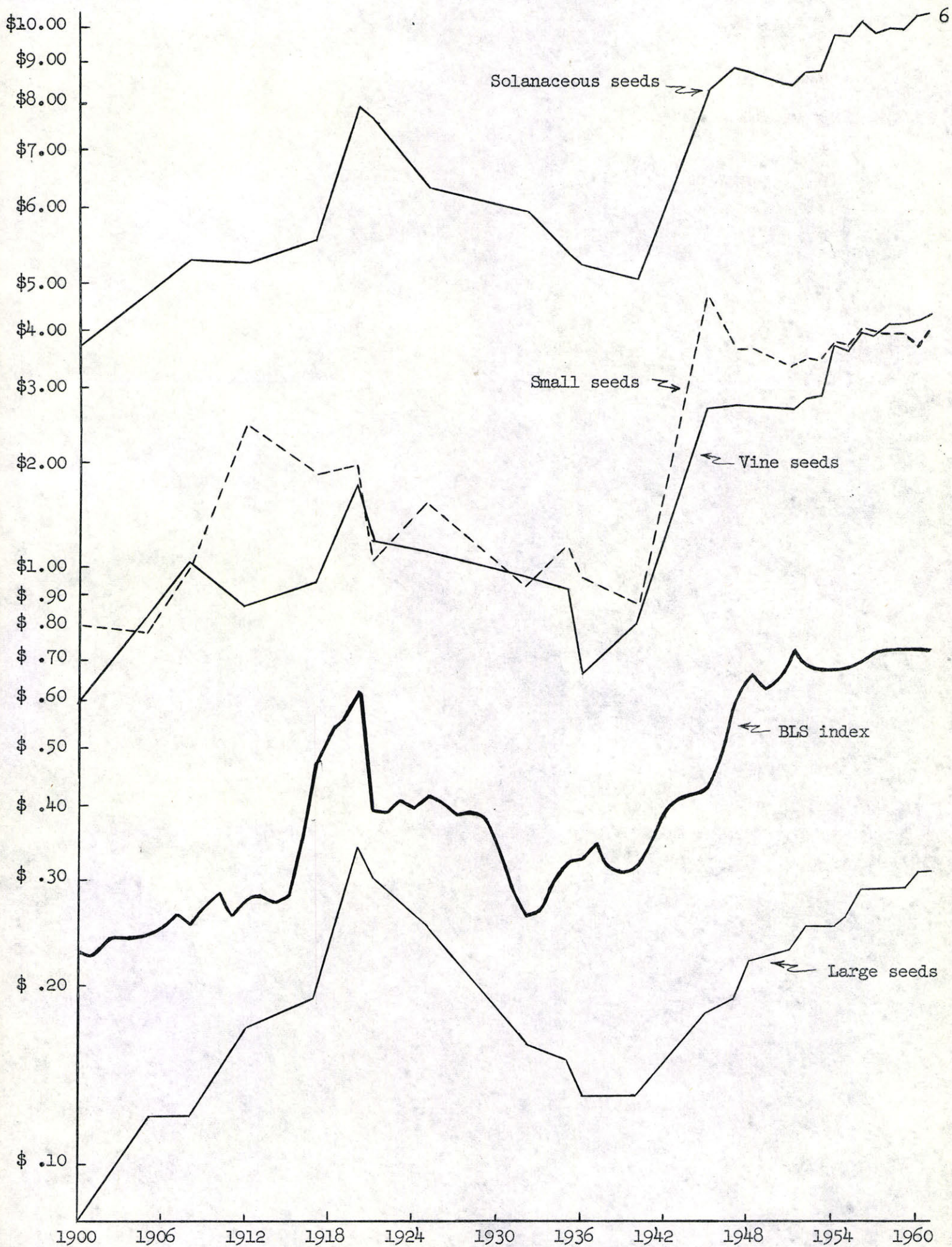


Fig. 1. Burpee's Blue List prices of vegetable seed per pound.

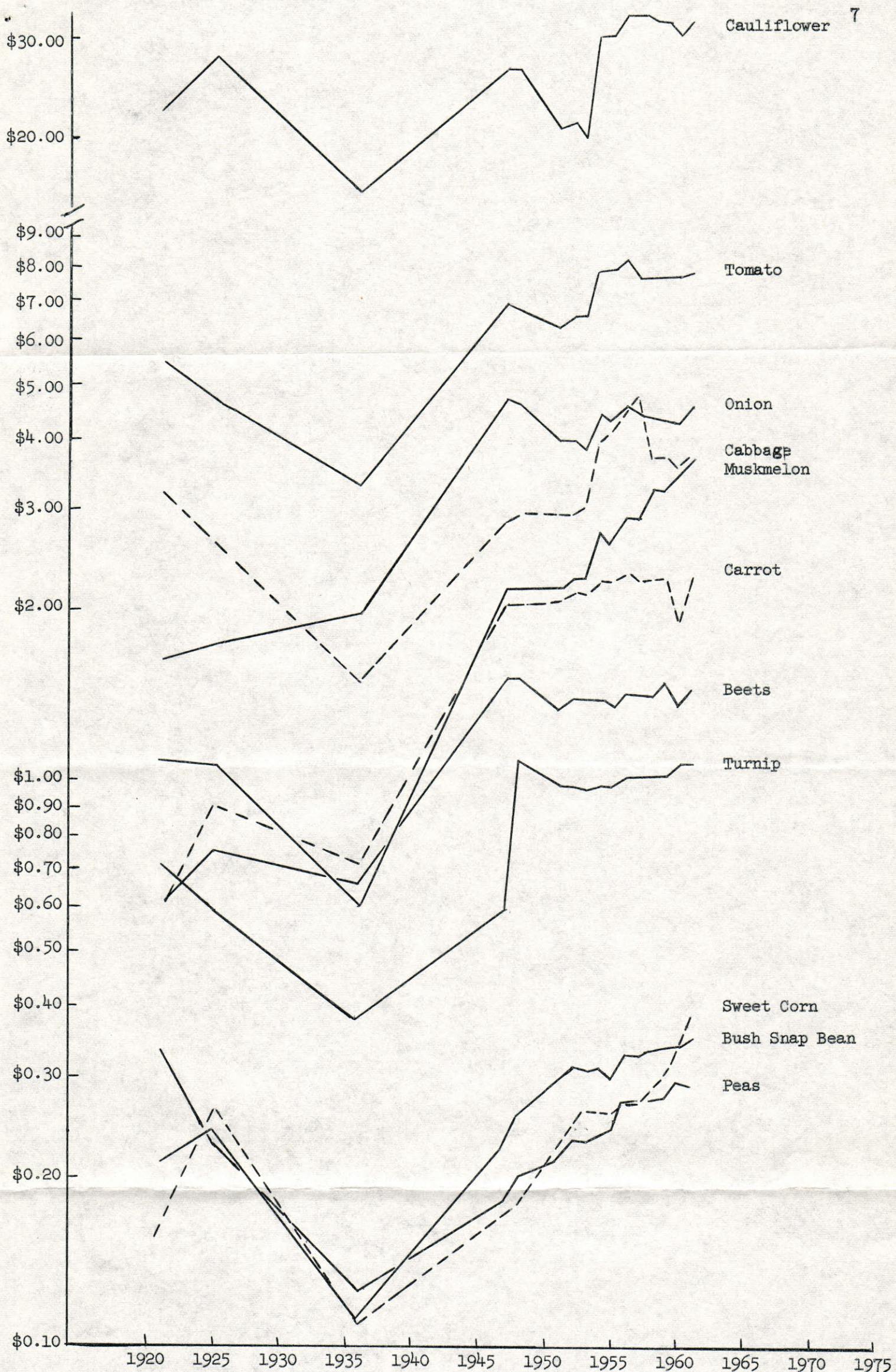


Fig. 2. Burpee's Blue List prices of vegetable seed per pound.