

The Edible Pea, from A to Z

Any pea, home-grown and freshly harvested at the appropriate time, tastes far better than any pea bought at a grocery store or market. If you're not already in the habit of growing your own peas, resolve to start this year.

Blossoms of sweet peas (the ones grown for their luscious-smelling flowers) are poisonous, but blossoms of edible peas are edible: they taste like raw peas. Harvest some edible pea blossoms for the salad bowl, or leave them attached to pea tendrils and use them as garnishes or vegetables.



Capuchin monks, most likely in Holland, developed the beautiful 'Blue Pod Capucijners' field pea some time between the 16th and 18th centuries. 'Grey,' 'Dutch Grey,' 'Purple Podded Grey,' and 'Pois à Crosse Violette' are other names for this very ornamental edible pea. Its violet, red and pink flowers and bluish-purple pods and leaf axils earn it a place in the garden, but the bonus is that you can: 1) harvest young flat pods to use like snow peas; 2) pick and shell fresh peas to eat, can or freeze; and 3) harvest the dry olive-brown seeds to store and use in soup.

Diseases that affect peas include pea enation virus and powdery mildew. Pea Enation Mosaic Virus (PEMV), transmitted by aphids, weakens pea vines, turning them yellow, distorting the pods, decreasing production and ultimately killing the plants. Prevention involves planting peas early enough (before March 31st) so that they are growing vigorously before the arrival of warm weather and the disease-carrying aphids. Plant enation-resistant varieties such as 'Maestro,' 'Corvallis,' 'Knight' and 'Grenadier' dwarf (18 to 20 inch) shelling peas; 'Green Arrow,' 'Oregon Pioneer' and 'Oregon Trail' semi-dwarf (24 to 30 inch) shelling peas; 'Cascadia' snap pea; and 'Oregon Sugar Pod II' and 'Oregon Giant' climbing (3 to 6 feet) snow peas. Powdery mildew, a problem in warm weather, can be controlled by dusting with sulfur, but it may take many applications. Planting early and selecting short-season varieties help avoid it.

Edible-pod peas include sugar snap peas (also known as snap peas, or as mange-tout in French) and snow peas (also known as Chinese, Oriental or sugar peas). Sugar snaps, (the result of a cross between snow peas and English peas) and snow peas don't have fibrous pods like English (shelling) peas, and most gardeners and chefs consider them more reliably sweet than English peas.

Fall peas should be sown sixty to ninety days before the average first hard frost date in your area.

Germinating peas in cold wet soil is a challenge. Even though peas are a cool season crop, the seeds germinate more readily at 70°F than at 40° or 50°F. In the Pacific Northwest, the generally-accepted rule is that peas should be sown six weeks before the last spring frost. Some gardeners gamble with a mid-January sowing. Washington's birthday is considered by many to be an appropriate sowing date, but if the soil is heavy and has not dried out sufficiently, the pea seed may simply rot. Carefully preparing the planting area in the fall, using raised beds, starting seed indoors in peat pots and/or pre-germinating seed in damp paper towels are techniques that can help the gardener get an extra-early start.

Harvesting: when to harvest is probably more important than which variety you plant. Snow pea pods should be perfectly flat with BB-sized little peas inside them when they are ready. Snap peas can be harvested any time after the pods have filled out with peas, but are still smooth and haven't lost their rich green color. They snap like green beans when they are ready. Check for strings along the center vein. English peas are usually ready 20 to 30 days after blooming; the pods should be plump and the peas tender. If a pod has lost its bright green color, it is probably over-mature, which translates to starchy and no longer sweet. Pick all peas as soon as they are mature, or the vines will not continue to produce. You may have to do a bit of tasting (no problem, right?) to determine what the pod will look like when it is at the perfect stage for picking. When you've figured it out, there may be a problem getting any peas back to the kitchen.

Inoculate pea seeds with nitrogen-fixing bacteria (a Rhizobia bacteria mixture) immediately before you sow them, to increase the chances of a good harvest. Buy the inoculant at local nurseries or through seed catalogs.

Jefferson, our third president, grew fifteen types of English peas at Monticello, competing with his neighbors each spring to see who would harvest the first fresh peas.

Kitchen gardens are where you'll find most pea vines and bushes, but creative gardeners who are short on space plant edible peas in ornamental beds and containers.

Let's use the pods after shucking English peas. Rinse, then steep them in chicken broth or vegetable stock with celery and onion. Puree for what Brits call a peascod soup.

Moisture needs increase to an inch of water a week after pea plants flower. Mulch should be applied to the pea patch when the peas are growing well and weather has warmed. Use four inches of straw to conserve moisture, keep the soil cool, and prolong the harvest.

Nitrogen-fixation is a process that takes place in little nodules on the roots of peas and other legumes, enabling them to take nitrogen from the air and turn it into plant-usable form.

Oregon Sugar Pod II,' an enation-resistant semi-dwarf (24 to 30 inch) snow pea, is virtually stringless.

Pea seeds are classified as wrinkled or smooth. The wrinkled varieties yield sweeter peas; the smooth-seeded types, although they mature earlier, yield starchier peas. Sow pea seed an inch deep and an inch or two apart. Slight crowding doesn't reduce production, so don't worry about thinning. Space-saving techniques include using

double rows spaced four to six inches apart, sowing evenly in nine-inch wide trenches, or broadcasting seed at a rate of one pound per one hundred square feet.

Questions about your pea patch? Contact your local master gardener clinic.

Rotating crops: Sow peas the year after tomatoes. While the tomatoes are still growing, undersow them with oats or another non-winter-hardy green manure crop. The soil will be enriched and protected during the winter, but there will be no regrowth problems in the spring to keep you from preparing the soil and getting your peas in early.

Succession planting can ensure a continuous harvest of peas from June into July. The best quality pea pods on dwarf or semi-dwarf plants are often produced in the first two weeks of harvesting, so stagger your planting. After the soil has warmed and dried out (April and later), sow peas deeper than you did in early spring: one and a half to two inches. Sow every three weeks at least until mid-May.

Trellises or other means of support are necessary for almost every type of pea, no matter what the catalog or seed packet says. The so-called leafless types of pea, grown in triple rows, can support themselves pretty well. The other types will need support. Use twiggy cuttings of leafless brush ('pea brush'), pushed deep into the soil, to support wide rows of dwarf and semi-dwarf peas. Netting, chicken wire, garden fencing, or string supported by stakes can be employed for taller types. The shady side of trellised climbing peas is a good place to plant shade-tolerant pea companions such as spinach or lettuce.

U should eat peas not only because they taste so good, but also because each 3.5-ounce serving of cooked peas provides you 5g of protein, less than 0.5g of fat, 2g of dietary fiber, 12g of carbohydrate, and only 70 calories. Snap and snow peas are lower in calories than shelling peas.

Vines of peas, when clipped two to six inches from the tip, are called pea tendrils, pea shoots, pea vines or dau miu in Cantonese. They have intense pea flavor which only intensifies when they are cooked. 'Snowflake' and 'Oregon Giant' snow peas and 'Cascadia' snap pea are varieties recommended for use as a vegetable or edible garnish. For growing tips and sample recipes using pea vines consult the articles written by Carol Miles in our references.

Weevils (pea leaf weevils) may notch the leaf edges of your pea seedlings while they are less than six inches tall. Chances are excellent that the seedlings will survive and thrive without any help from you. However, applying extra nitrogen accelerates the growth of the seedlings, enabling them to get through the susceptible stage a bit faster. Avoid weevil buildup in the soil by rotating your pea patch to a different location in the garden every year during a four or five year period.

XL: the size of 'Mammoth Melting Sugar' snow pea vines, one of our favorites. The vines can outgrow your reach, and the pods are extra large, too.

Yields from planting 133 pea plants six inches apart in every direction, in a four- by eight-foot raised bed, should be about ten pounds of bush shell peas or fifteen pounds of bush snap peas. A 30 to 50 foot row of peas should

feed a family of four through the typical season during which peas are harvested, and provide some peas for the freezer, as well.

ZZZZZZ ... Is that you, asleep over this article? Wake up and look at our resources!

Resources

[A Day in the Life of Thomas Jefferson](#). Retrieved February 13, 2006 from the Monticello website.

[Amishland Heirloom Seeds](#). (Sells 'Blue Pod Capucijners' field pea.)

Bubel, Nancy. *The New Seed-Starters Handbook*. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1988.

Coleman, Eliot. *The New Organic Grower*. Chelsea, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1989.

[All About Peas](#). Kennell, Holly S., WSU Extension Gardening in Western Washington Library. Retrieved February 13, 2006.

McClure, Susan and Sally Roth. *Companion Planting*. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1994.

Miles, Carol A., Rei Nakatani and Mark Musick. "[Pea Vine Production and Marketing Study](#)". Retrieved February 13, 2006.

Miles, Carol A. "[Pea Shoots](#)." Retrieved February 13, 2006.

Patent, Dorothy Hinshaw and Diane E. Bilderback. *The Book of Garden Secrets*. Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books, 1997.

Poisson Leandre and Gretch Vogel Poisson. *Solar Gardening*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1994.

[Revolution Seeds](#). (Sells 'Blue Pod Capucijners' field pea.)

Tantillo, Tony and Sam Gugino. *Eat Fresh, Stay Healthy*. New York, New York: MACMILLAN, 1997.

[William Dam Seeds Ltd](#). (Sells 'Blue Pod Capucijners' field pea.)