

GROWING PEAS



PEA VITAL STATISTICS

Family: Leguminosae

Species: *Pisum sativum*

Soil: deep, well-drained sandy loam

pH: 6.0-7.0

Light: full sun, tolerates partial shade

Soil temperature for germination: 40-75F, 75F optimum

Soil temperature for growing on: 60-65F

Air temperature for best growth: 55-70F

Seed germination: 6-17 days

Seed planting depth: 1 inch

Seed viability: 3 years

Seeds per ounce: 200

Row spacing: 36-48 inches apart

WHY PEAS?

Mouthwatering, tender, sweet fresh peas are a culinary delight and one of the very best reasons for having a garden. Fresh peas have an unparalleled sweetness and are among those vegetables that can never be equaled by supermarket produce.

Peas were the first vegetable to be successfully frozen, and they are more popular today than any other type of frozen vegetable, but they don't taste as good as the peas we pick from the garden. The reason is quite simple, as soon as the pod is pulled from the plant, the sugar content of the peas within starts to turn to starch.

Historically, peas have been used since the beginning of civilization. Pea seeds were found in Stone Age villages in Switzerland as well as in Egyptian tombs. Of course they were eaten only as a dried vegetable until about 1,000 years ago when the wealthy and fashionable in Britain adopted the continental idea of cooking fresh peas.

We consider them to be the ultimate crop for the lazy gardener, plant them in minutes and come back weeks later to harvest them

HOW TO GROW PEAS

DAYS TO MATURITY

Ripening time varies with location and growing season and is influenced by soil and weather conditions. The days to maturity cited here gives the approximate number of days from transplanting until the first peas are ready to pick.

Keep in mind that the maturity date is an estimate of when the first peas will be ready to harvest. Variations in your garden can be due to differences in growing season, soil fertility and other conditions where they were tested.

NOTE: to determine the length of your growing season, count the number of days between your average date of the last frost in spring and the average date of the first frost in fall. The length of the growing season can range from less than 100 days in northern climates to 365 days in southern climates.

WHICH PEA TYPE FOR YOU?

GARDEN PEA or ENGLISH PEA

The traditional pea has a tough usually inedible outer pod with delicate, sweet, tender peas inside.

SNOW PEA or CHINESE PEA

When you think stir-fry these sweet-tasting, flat, tender pods come to mind. They are best when harvested while the peas inside them are quite small and undeveloped.

SNAP PEA

These sweet, crunchy peas have both a delicate edible pod and full-size peas inside with the sweetness of the best garden peas. They are wonderful eaten raw, lightly steamed, or stir-fried.

GROWING ON

WHEN TO PLANT SEEDS

Peas thrive in cool weather and once germinated will tolerate damp early spring conditions quite well, because of this, tradition holds that you plant peas "as soon as the soil can be worked." However, the cooler the soil, the slower the germination time: from 8 days in 68F soil, to 36 days in 40F soil. Let the soil warm up a little so the seeds spend less time in the ground. A good rule of thumb is to plant your peas 3-4 weeks before your last average frost date, if the soil is ready.

Similar to other legumes, peas take nitrogen from the air with the aid of soil bacteria, so before planting, we recommend coating the seeds with a powdered legume inoculant to aid this process.

There are two common methods for planting peas, with trellises (support) or without. If planting with support, plant the seeds about 1 inch apart in two narrow bands on both sides of the trellis or fence. Plants do not require thinning, as peas grow much better in thick stand. If planting without support, we recommend wide row planting.

Wide row planting is very easy and it is best used with dwarf varieties. Basically, you'll create a bed at least 18 wide (we usually make our beds 36 inches wide), then plant the peas in rows 6 inches apart. Tamp them down and cover with soil. As the pea plants grow, they cling to each other for support. When planted in wide row bands, peas don't require any weeding as the plants quickly shade out any weed competition, plus the soil stays moist and cool.

SUPPORT

All peas benefit from support. It keeps them from rotting on the ground and lets the pods hang straight down, making them less misshapen and easier to pick. Also, when supported, the vines have air circulating freely around them thus they can't be as easily infected by disease. The only time we don't recommend some type of support is if you plant in wide

rows. With this technique the peas support themselves.

Many types of wire fencing or nylon netting can be used to train peas. You can also use brush cuttings about 1/4 – 1/2 inch thick at the base. Push the brush solidly into the ground in a dense row and then plant the peas on both sides. Start training the tendrils on the supports when the plants are about 6 inches tall.

Whatever type of support you choose, make sure it's a bit taller than the height your variety will reach and set it up before planting to avoid stepping on small plants later on.

SOIL PREPARATION

Peas thrive in deep, rich, well-drained soil in a sunny location. The plants do best in soil with a pH ranging from 6.0-7.0. We recommend testing your soil in the fall and adjusting the pH range, if needed, at that time. Fall is also a good time for deep spading or double digging (to a depth of 8-12 inches) and for incorporating organic matter into your soil. The addition of compost, leaf mold or peat moss provides organic matter lightens and aerates heavy soils as well as increasing the moisture holding capacity of sandy soils.

In the early spring, rake to break up clods and remove stones. Fertilize as recommended by your soil test results.

FERTILIZING

Peas don't require much fertilizer, especially nitrogen, but to help them along, when the seedlings are 2-4 inches tall you can fertilize them with a complete organic fertilizer. Alternatively you can work a 2-3 inch layer of compost into your pea bed. You can also broadcast 1-2 pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer over each 100 square feet of garden space and work it into the top 2-3 inches of soil (do this a day or two before planting).

CAUTION: When fertilizing, please keep this in mind – MORE IS NOT BETTER – boosting the amount of fertilizer can damage your plants. An overdose of fertilizer causes plants to grow too rapidly and damage new roots thereby stunting plant growth and significantly setting back your harvest.

WATER

Peas need an evenly moist soil. Never let them dry out. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to put a 2 inch layer of grass clippings around the base of the plants as soon as they germinate.

WEDDING

Peas have shallow roots so care must be taken when weeding around the plants. It's best to hand-pull any weeds within a 1-foot radius of the plants. Keep the rows thoroughly weeded until the plants are half-grown, from then on they can out compete the weeds.

HOW TO EXTEND YOUR GROWING SEASON

SHORT GROWING SEASON AREAS

Peas are one of the vegetables that thrive in cooler temperatures. But to get the earliest peas, we recommend creating raised beds the fall before you plant your peas. A raised bed gets soil temperatures of 50F or higher quite early in the spring and this leads to faster seed germination. Peas are also one of the few crops northern gardeners can plant with

success during two seasons. Both spring and fall plantings can be successful, however, yields in fall plantings are generally much smaller.

WARM GROWING SEASON AREAS

Peas can be grown with the most success if they are planted in wide rows (see PLANTING section above). A 2-3 inch layer of mulch, such as grass clippings, straw or other organic material, can help keep the soil from getting too hot and thus extend your harvest season. We've found that in places like Georgia, your best bet is to plant your peas in mid-January to mid-February, whereas in Phoenix, Arizona the best time to plant is mid-September to November. Contact your local extension agent if you have questions about when to plant in your area.

PEA TROUBLES

One nice thing about peas is that they have very few serious pests or diseases that become a serious problem for the home gardener. Fusarium Wilt, Downy Mildew and Powdery Mildew are the most common pea diseases. Growing resistant varieties and practicing crop rotation are the best control measures. The most widespread pest of peas, the Pea Aphid, is a pear-shaped, 1/8 inch, green insect that sucks the juices from pea leaves and stems and can cause plants to wilt and stunt their growth. They can be controlled by spraying plants with insecticidal soap, pyrethrin or Neem oil.

HARVESTING

Pick peas each day during the harvest season to harvest the best quality pods and encourage further production, especially with pole types.

Pods are ready for picking when they are plump, smooth, and bright green pods. Start harvesting at this stage, beginning at the bottom of the plant and working upwards. Use two hands, one to hold the stem and the other to pick off the pod. Avoid any pods that are shriveled or have bulges caused by large peas. Peas that are too big are overly mature and will taste mealy.

The best time to pick is early morning when the pods are crispest. If you can't pick in the morning, the cool of the evening is another good picking time, but the peas don't stay fresh for as long.

COOKING

Their versatility is limitless. They are delightful raw (this is often the best way to get kids to try peas). They can be boiled, steamed, stir-fried and are best if only cooked for 2-3 minutes.

NOTE: We highly recommend the following cookbooks for pepper recipes:

The Victory Garden Cookbook by Marian Morash

Too Many Tomatoes, Squash, Beans and Other Good Things by Lois M. Landau & Laura G. Myers

Ball Blue Book – Guide to Home Canning, Freezing and Dehydration

Stocking Up III by Carol Huppig

Joy of Gardening Cookbook by Janet Ballantyne

Putting Food By by Greene, Hertzberg & Vaughan

STORAGE

Fresh peas do not store very well as their natural sugars convert to starch rapidly. You may refrigerate peas in a tightly sealed plastic bag for 2-5 days, but you'll notice a marked decrease in flavor.

HINTS FOR USING GARDEN FRESH PEAS

Following are some of our favorite hints, tips and recipe books for using bumper crops of garden fresh peas.

YIELDS

2 pounds of unshelled peas will serve 4 people

1 pound unshelled peas = 1 cup shelled peas = 2 servings

1 pound sugar snap peas = 4-5 cups = 4-6 servings

1 pound snow peas = 3 servings

FREEZING

Peas freeze beautifully. Garden Peas: Shell, then blanch in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain and place in ice water for 2 minutes drain again. Loosely pack in freezer bags, label and freeze.

Sugar Snap and Snow Peas: Blanch for 2 minutes then chill in ice water for 5 minutes. Place in a single layer on trays and freeze. Once frozen, transfer to freezer bags, label and freeze.