

Peas

Pisum sativum

Family – Leguminosae

Peas are a frost-hardy cool season vegetable that you can grow here in early spring and during fall and early winter. You can begin planting peas when the soil temperature reaches at least 45°F – usually sometime in mid-February.

Peas date back in history to the beginnings of agriculture and beyond – at least 9,000 years. They are thought to have been first cultivated in the region that is today northern India and were grown for drying and storage – often referred to as “pulses” they were the staple food for many. Of course, today’s varieties barely resemble those early cultivars. When we think of peas, it is usually the sweet fresh green stage, with or without edible pods. However, those early peas had a lower sugar content than the cultivars we usually grow today.

Varieties

Terminology in pea varieties differs some from catalog to catalog, but usually falls into three basic categories.

Shelling Peas – varieties developed for producing fresh green peas (shelled). They can also be left to maturity, shelled and dried for storage. They are best harvested when the seeds are fully developed or slightly before. Shelled peas are a little like corn – the sugars turn to starch quickly, so don’t store them long in the frig.

Edible Pod or Sugar Peas – varieties developed to produce edible fruit – seeds and pods. They are best harvested when the seeds are forming, but before fully developed in the pod.

Snow Peas or Chinese Peas – varieties developed to produce an edible pod. They are best harvested when the pods are fully formed, but the seeds are just beginning to show. When the pods begin to curl their flavor declines.

Within these categories, your choices range from tall to short to dwarf growth form. Selecting the varieties that fit your gardening situation may require some trial and error.

Planting and Timing

Spring

Although peas seeds will germinate at 45°F, you will have much better germination in soil temperatures between 55-65°F. For a spring crop plant peas in mid-February, which will give you the 60-70 days required until harvest - May temperatures can get to the

upper 90s, which reduces the flavor of most varieties. If you are late getting started, the shelling pea variety “Alaska” and the edible pod variety “Cascadia” both holds their flavor in the heat and produces well here.

Fall

For a fall and winter crop of peas, begin planting in August. Mulch the soil well to reduce temperatures and conserve moisture in the upper levels.

Peas grow best when sown 1-1 ½ “deep and 2-3” apart. Providing trellis support even for short varieties will increase yields considerably and prove well worth the effort. I plant peas on a 4-5” grid in broad beds as well as in rows and use bushy branches stuck in the soil for a trellis.

For fall and winter crops you might want to explore some of the “powdery mildew” resistant varieties – as that can be a problem here in early fall as nighttime temperatures drop below 60°F.

If you have not planted peas in the space before, you will have a much better harvest if you inoculate the seed before planting. Be sure to purchase inoculants for peas, not for beans or clover or some other legume type. If you have grown peas in the space before, inoculating again is not important.

Down Below – Peas and Roots

Besides being tasty and easy to grow, peas are good for your garden soil. As a member of the Legume family, they form special associations with bacteria in the soil that enables the plants to fix nitrogen – to take nitrogen from the air trapped in the soil pores and convert it into a form that the plants can use. These rhizobia bacterial enter the hair roots and reproduce, eventually forming nodules within the roots. If you see lumpy nodules on the roots of peas and beans, it is most likely rhizobium nodules and not root-knot nematodes nodules. Soil temperatures above 80°F, water stress and/or soils rich in nitrogen will reduce nodule formation.

Although peas can send roots down to 4 feet, most of the root growth is in the top 12” of soil, so you can grow them in pots in a sunny location. Because of this shallow rooting, peas can be easily water stressed and disturbed by cultivating – particularly in late spring.

For a food that is easy to grow, easy to eat and good for the soil, try one or more of the many varieties of garden peas showing up in the annual flood of seed catalogues.

Good Gardening and Good Eating,

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January 2011