

# In Praise of Peas

Few things can match the eating pleasure of fresh peas from the family garden and June typically is the month this culinary delight is harvested. Peas represent an example of a food that requires a bit of work before it can be enjoyed, but for most “shelling peas” is a labor of love because of the ultimate results. In addition to being tasty, peas provide valuable vitamins and minerals to the human diet while being only modest in caloric content.

The word “pea” was derived from the Latin word *pisum* which (later) was introduced into the English language as *pease*. The nursery rhyme “pease porridge hot “ makes reference to what we would call pea today. Since people often associated a word ending with “s” as being plural, pea gradually became the singular notation. The term is somewhat generic and can refer to different species in the *Fabaceae* family depending on country or region. Black-eyed pea, pigeon pea and cow pea are examples of species that commonly are referred to as pea in the areas they are popular. For most, however, pea refers to *Pisum sativum*, or English (garden) pea. Snap pea and snow (sugar) pea represent biotypes of the species whose entire pod can be consumed when harvested at an early stage of maturity.

Middle Asia, from northwest India through Afghanistan, is believed to be the primary center of origin for pea. Cultivation of peas dates back 5000 years to the Bronze Age. It probably was first grown for its dried seed and used as pulse crops are used today. It is known that the Greeks and Romans grew peas before the Christian era but writings indicate the crop held no special favor. Ancient types of peas probably were much smaller, darker colored and differed otherwise from modern garden types.

The first mention of “green peas” in the literature came after the Norman Conquest of England. By the 12th century peas were listed among the food

crops stored in a nunnery near London. It was not until the 16th century that peas were described more fully in French literature.

By that time, peas differed in type such as tall or dwarf; green, yellow or white seed colors; and smooth, pitted or wrinkled seeds. By the end of the 17th century peas were a rare delicacy and handsome prices were reportedly paid for them in France. The obsession people of that era had for peas is reflected in the writing of Madame de Maintenon (second wife of King Louis XIV) who noted, “Some ladies, even after having supped at the Royal Table, and well supped too, returning to their own homes, at the

risk of suffering from indigestion, will again eat peas before going to bed. It is both a fashion and a madness”.

Garden pea is a cool-season crop that tolerates light frosts and has the ability to germinate in relatively cool soil temperatures. Since warm summer temperatures adversely affect both yield and quality, planting is done early in the spring as soon as the soil can be worked. Peas prefer a well-drained garden loam with a pH of between 6.0 and 6.5. Sow seeds directly in the soil about one inch deep and two inches apart in rows spaced between 18 and 24 inches apart. Taller varieties will need three feet between rows as well as some method of trellising or support.

Fertilizer application should be based on soil tests and done before seeds are planted. Consistent with



other legumes, peas (with the aid of symbiotic bacteria) have the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen. However, if plants appear chlorotic after pods begin to set, a side dressing of nitrogen may be necessary. Peas prefer soil that is kept uniformly moist but not wet.

Although peas are relatively pest free, aphids, leafhoppers, and seed corn maggot can be problematic. Diseases that can occur include fusarium wilt, powdery mildew as well as root and seed rot. The latter can be especially troublesome in poorly drained soil or during wet springs. Rotating planting location in the garden from year-to-year

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is helpful in the disease management of peas.

Since peas do not compete well with weeds the latter must be controlled. Hand weeding and cultivation probably are the most logical way to control weeds in home garden plantings. However, herbicides such as trifluralin (Treflan®) and pendimethalin (Prowl®) are labeled for weed control in peas.

Depending on cultivar, planting date and seasonal temperatures, peas usually are ready for harvest about the middle of June and harvest lasts for about two weeks. Timing the harvest of peas is critical for top eating quality. Pick the pods as soon as they have swollen (appear round) since peas allowed to mature on the plant too long tend to convert sugars to starch thus reducing their sweetness. As with sweet corn, peas are tastiest immediately after being picked.

There are several cultivars of garden pea that do well in our area. Popular choices include Spring (57 days; 22 inches tall), Sparkle (60 days; 18 inches tall), Little Marvel (63 days; 18 inches tall), Lincoln (67 days; 30 inches tall), Green Arrow (68 days; 28 inches tall), Bolero (69 days; 28 inches tall), and Wando (70 days; 30 inches tall). Taller cultivars will require trellising while shorter one (18 inches tall) can be grown without.

As mentioned above peas are a good source of certain vitamins and minerals as well as insoluble dietary fiber. The latter has been shown to reduce cholesterol. One-half cup of cooked peas contains the following nutrients: 67 calories, 2.4 grams dietary fiber, 4.3 grams protein, 12.5 grams carbohydrates, 478 IU vitamin A, 11.4 mg. vitamin C, 50.7 micrograms folic

acid, 1.2 mg iron, 217 mg potassium and 31 mg magnesium.

Peas from the garden freeze exceptionally well but must be blanched in order to keep enzymes and bacteria from destroying nutrients and changing color, flavor and texture. Blanching is accomplished by immersing peas in boiling water for about two minutes followed by cooling them in ice water.

Fresh or frozen, peas may be prepared in a number of different ways or combined with a variety of dishes. Simply put, (lightly) buttered peas fresh from the garden is one of life's unique pleasures.

*David Trinklein,  
Associate Professor  
Division of Plant Sciences  
TrinkleinD@missouri.edu*