

PEA (*Pisum sativum*)



Full Sun



Types of Peas

There are various kinds of peas, including those with a high sugar content (wrinkled seeded) and those with less sugar (smooth seeded), field peas grown for forage and silage, and edible-podded types. The cultural methods are virtually the same for all.

The Planting and Culture of Peas

Cool weather is essential for growing peas. When temperatures are high, blossoms do not set and pods dry up or fail to fill unless the roots are kept cool by a heavy mulch of organic matter. In the South and in the warm parts of California, gardeners should grow their peas during fall, winter and early-spring months.

Soil and the Planting of Peas

The pea grower must regulate his planting according to his particular soil conditions. Heavy soil calls for a shallow seeding, and light soil for deep planting. If the peas are planted too deeply in a heavy clay soil, heavy rains before the plants are up can form a hard crust that will make it difficult for the peas to break through. To avoid this problem, work the soil deeply until it is quite flaky.

Should the ground be hard and dry, deep planting is essential to provide the moisture necessary to germinate the seed. Plenty of organic matter worked into the soil will help improve the soil. A good, well-rotted manure should be applied and turned under before planting.

The pea, being a legume, absorbs its supply of nitrogen from the air after germination. Bone meal is a fine source of nitrogen until then. It has a slow action in the soil and cannot harm any crop. A suggested organic fertilizer for peas consists of one part dried blood (usually obtained from slaughterhouses), one part bone meal and one part greensand, potash material or granite dust. This fertilizer should be applied at the rate of from 1/4 to 1/2 pound per square foot of soil surface.

Planting Peas

It is best to start early with this crop and, to insure a continuous early summer harvest, to buy varieties that mature at different times. Check with your local weather bureau or extension service for information on the best planting date for your area. The tall varieties should be planted about ten days later than the low bush varieties.

To encourage rapid germination, soak the seed overnight. This will soften the seed coat and cause tiny sprouts to appear. Immediately before planting, inoculate the sprouted seed with an appropriate nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

Low bush peas are planted in drills about two inches deep in light sandy soil, and about one inch deep in heavy or claylike soil. Later plantings should be twice as deep. Late plantings are subject to greater heat when they come up and deeper planting and mulching will insure more moisture and greater coolness. The seed can be scattered freely in the drill, not less than one inch apart.

As the plants come up they can be thinned to stand two to three inches apart. One pound of seed is enough for a 100-foot row.

High varieties are planted somewhat differently. The seed are planted in double rows 30 to 36 inches apart. The rows can consist of two parallel drills six inches apart, or one trench six inches wide and four inches deep. Plant seed about 2 1/2 inches apart and cover them with enough soil to half-fill the drills or trench. After the plants have emerged, finish filling-in the rows. Planted in this way, about one pound of seed will plant a double, 100-foot row.

Supporting Pea Plants

No variety of peas will amount to much without the proper support for the plants. The best ones are made of brush that has plenty of twigs and has its bark intact. Placed firmly in the ground between the rows, this "brush fence" should stand about four or five feet high.

Many gardeners prefer to use a fine-mesh chicken-wire fence instead of the brush since it may be used season after season. Wire should be securely fastened to stakes placed at six-foot intervals down the rows. Small-meshed wire is best because it sags less than the larger-meshed kind.

Pea Insect Pests and Diseases

There are a few common diseases of peas. Their severity is usually determined by climatic conditions. Fungi which cause root rot may destroy the entire pea crop. A good control is to rotate the crop with unrelated crops each season. Do not plant peas on low-lying spots where drainage is poor. The same measures are valuable in controlling wilt, bacterial blight and anthracnose. If you are having trouble with damping-off, you may be planting your peas too deeply.

Many kinds of insects may attack peas, but only two are serious pests. The pea aphid attacks young vines and sucks the juices from the developing tips. The pea weevil infests the pods.

Harvesting Peas

Green peas should be harvested when they are young and tender. If left to hang on the vines too long, they become starchy and hard. They should be shelled and cooked within an hour or so after picking because in two hours after picking the sugar begins to turn to starch. Although still edible, they are not as sweet.

Tearing or jerking pods from the vines injures the plants so much that they may stop bearing pods. Since peas mature rapidly, plan to preserve the surplus by canning, or preferably, freezing. Peas can also be dried. Shell and blanch for 15 minutes over steam. Dry in the sun or use another method of drying.

Edible-pod varieties should be harvested when the peas are just beginning to form. At this stage, the pea and the pod are stringless and can be eaten together. Peas alone can be eaten at a later stage, but they must be picked while still young.

Varieties of Peas

A number of pea varieties are available. The familiar green peas come in extra-early, dwarf and large varieties. Extra Early Alaska is the earliest dwarf available; it is hardy, wilt resistant and matures uniformly.

Improved Laxton's Progress is an early dwarf that grows to about 16 to 18 inches high and

produces large pods of uniform size.

Little Marvel holds the peas in picking condition longer than other varieties. Burpee's Blue Bantam produces well over a long period if the pods are kept picked. Lincoln, which reaches 30 inches in height, is a good freezer that produces through July. Wando, a good main-crop pea, stands hot, dry weather well, and is a good canner and freezer.

Edible-pod peas are also called snow peas and sugar peas. They are eaten pod and all and can be used raw in salads, steamed or stir-fried with Chinese foods. Melting Sugar is a tall-standing variety, producing four- to five-foot vines that must be staked. Dwarf Gray Sugar is an early, hardy and disease-resistant dwarf.

Other types of edible peas are brown Crowder peas, available in several varieties, and black-eyed peas. The latter can be eaten fresh or dried for later use.