

Dwarf bush peas, tall climbing peas, snow peas that are eaten pods and all, peas sprouts or pea tips and tendrils – whatever way you look at it, the versatile pea deserves to be more widely planted.

Fact File

<p>Botanical Name: Pisum sativum Family: Fabaceae Climatic Range: Preferably cool, frost free conditions. Planting Season: In frost free cold and cool temperate regions peas can be planted from May until September. May, June and July are optimum months for planting in warm temperate and subtropical regions.</p>
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Description: Peas are annual plants. They grow, flower and fruit in 8 – 14 weeks depending on the variety grown. Dwarf varieties of garden and snow peas generally grow to less than one metre. Climbing garden and snow peas reach over two metres in height. The short-lived flowers are white or purple and often sweetly perfumed.



Snow peas are also referred to as sugar snap peas. This name aptly describes their sweet flavour and the ideal stage of harvest – when the pods snap cleanly in half.

Despite the name, sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) are only distantly related to garden peas. The pods of sweet peas are not generally eaten.

Propagation

Peas are traditionally planted in rows to facilitate easier harvesting and provide adequate air circulation between plants. Plant seeds 10cm apart with at least 60 cm between rows. For prolonged harvest, successive crops are best sown at 2-3 weeks intervals.

On balconies and patios peas can be grown in planter troughs. Alternatively a standard 20cm plastic pot will accommodate 6-8 seeds. Even dwarf varieties of peas are best given some form of support as plants. Pods deteriorate where they come in contact with the soil. Training peas to grow over lattice or along fences makes great use of vertical space. Where you cannot go up, go down. Try growing dwarf peas in hanging baskets and letting them cascade over the edge!

Most gardeners are familiar with garden peas, the skins of which are shelled to reveal their delicate contents. You need to grow a lot of these peas to make a meal, especially as they are so delicious fresh from the garden that less than half will probably make it into the kitchen! Shelling peas can also be quite time consuming. Snow peas are particularly good value. The delicious sweet pods are eaten whole, so there is less waste.

Growing and Harvesting Your Own

Peas are legumes. They have a special association with bacteria that enables them to fix nitrogen from the air. This means that soil used for growing peas does not need to be as nitrogen rich as soil for growing some other vegetables. In fact, excess nitrogen applied to the soil in the form of rich compost or manure is likely to produce excessive vegetative growth at the expense of flower and pea production. Avoid growing peas in a garden that has previously grown your summer bean crops as pest and disease problems may be transferred from one crop to the other.

Peas prefer well-drained, slightly alkaline soil. Applying garden lime, Dolomite or wood ash prior to planting is beneficial. Good levels of phosphorous and potassium are also important. Soil that has been prepared with poultry manure for a previous crop should contain sufficient nutrients. Alternatively, an application of rock phosphate or blood and bone will be beneficial.

Comfrey and seaweed used as mulch or prepared as a liquid fertiliser are useful in supplying additional elements.

Peas need to be picked continuously once they begin to form pods or production will fall. The main harvest period is usually only 2-3 weeks for garden peas and 5-6 weeks for snow peas.

Potential problems:

Where viable seed fails to germinate overwatering and excessive cold are generally to blame. Try sowing the seed into moist soil, but do not water until germination occurs. Mice, rats, bandicoots, slugs and snails can also dine out on freshly planted seeds and sprouting plants.

A grey, talcum-like appearance on plants indicates an attack of powdery mildew. Cool temperatures and high humidity are perfect conditions for the disease to occur. Plants deteriorate quickly, often taking on a burnt appearance. Be on the look out for disease resistant varieties. Avoid overhead watering of plants during the cool of the evening. Liquid seaweed fertiliser applied over the foliage on warm sunny days builds disease resistance. Use of dusting or wettable sulphur is also permitted under organic gardening regimes as is use of potassium bicarbonate based sprays such as Eco-Carb.

Seed Saving:

Peas are generally self-pollinating, making them a good crop for novice seed savers. Having said this, of course you should avoid growing different pea varieties directly beside one another. The rampant growth may cause plants to intermingle and then you will not know what you are collecting. Avoid saving seed from plants showing poor growth and production or susceptibility to disease.

Correct timing is essential when collecting pods for seed saving. If too immature, germination from the saved seeds will be poor, if left too long the seeds are likely to germinate within the pod, particularly in damp or humid weather.

Sprouts, Tips and Tendrils

Collecting your own seed means you will have an opportunity to grow your own pea sprouts. Sow the seeds thickly into a clean seed raising tray filled with compost or seed raising mixture. Allow the peas to shoot to around 10cm high, before using scissors to trim them off just above ground level. You only get one sprout per seed, making the exercise fairly extravagant, but if you are saving your own seed, it is a deliciously decadent way to enjoy your harvest.

Keep in mind that all parts of the pea plant are edible including the sweet, young tendrils and green tips of the growing plants. Harvesting the tender new growth through tip pruning helps to encourage branching and ultimately increases production.

Eat them fresh or stir fried.

Popular Varieties

Garden Peas

Greenfeast produces dwarf, heavy bearing peas that reach around 1m. Plants take around 14 weeks to mature.

Telephone is a climbing garden pea that grows to 2m in height and bears over a 3-5 week period.

Massey Gem is a dwarf variety that is prized for its early production.

Snow Peas

Bikini grows to 1m high and provides a yield of delicious sweet 8cm long snow peas.

Sugar Snap is available in dwarf (60cm) and tall (2m) varieties. The early maturing, succulent pods are produced over an extended period.

Sugar Bon is a dwarf variety with good resistance to powdery mildew.