

Peas, Peas, Peas

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It's time to think about planting peas. When I think about peas I think of standing in my mother's northern garden in the summer sunshine eating peas right off the vine. I frequently had to be restrained from picking the bushes clean, because they are so delicious. Of course I'm talking about garden peas, or English peas, or green peas, and their cousins snow peas and snap peas.

Please don't reject the idea of fresh green peas just because you don't like frozen peas or those insipid dull green things that come from a can, or even the overripe (not so) fresh shell peas you sometimes find in the grocery store. There is no comparison. Peas right from the garden are tender, sweet, and luscious, worthy to be eaten raw or in salads, or very lightly sautéed or steamed.

When our family moved to the south my mother tried to grow peas in her spring garden with little success. All the neighborly advice indicated she was planting the wrong kind of peas. She needed field peas or crowder peas or white acre peas, or blackeyed, pinkeyed, some kind of eyed peas. What were they?

We get the same kind of questions when people who have recently moved to our area from the north visit the VegHeadz demonstration vegetable garden at the Leon County Extension Office. The trouble is, southern peas and garden peas are not like two peas in a pod. While both are from the botanical family Fabaceae, the green pea and field pea or cowpea varieties not only look different and taste different, but they have much different growing habits.

Green peas have been grown in Europe and Asia since the Stone Age. They are a cool weather crop and with the exception of those used for dried split peas, are harvested while still immature. They can be shelled when the peas have just filled the pod, or eaten shell and all either before peas form (snow peas) or after they develop in the pod (snap peas), both designated as *P. sativum* var. *macrocarpum*,

While gardening lore has green peas being planted on Valentine's Day along with potatoes, in north Florida, all varieties of green peas can be planted from September to March. They are sown directly in the ground, and for faster germination, they can be soaked in water overnight prior to planting. They will benefit from protection against extreme cold but have been reported to recover from temperatures down to 20 degrees. In the warmer days of spring, pod production will decrease and eventually stop. However, snap peas have a higher tolerance for warm temperatures than green peas. I prefer to plant peas in mid-January to mid-February for an early spring harvest to avoid raiding by garden pests.

Later in spring the fast-growing tender green shoots are a banquet for aphids which can usually be discouraged with insecticidal soap. Peas are vining plants and need some type of support or trellis to climb on. They should be picked every day when they are bearing for if they are left on the vine too long, they become tough and mealy. There is also a variety of peas known as sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*), which are grown just for their sweet-smelling multi-colored flowers. Their leaves and pods are poisonous.

Field peas or cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp.) have been cultivated in Africa for centuries and are now grown world-wide. They are a warm weather crop and are more bean-like, are rarely used without first shelling them, and are often harvested after they have matured to use as dried peas, such as black eyed peas. They are more hearty and benefit from longer cooking than green peas, and are delicious seasoned with bacon or other smoked meats. A summer meal with tomatoes and corn is just not complete without fresh field peas. I've grown to love them as much as the green peas from my mother's garden.

All varieties of field peas can be planted from early April through August. They will continue to thrive when many of your spring crops have been harvested or conquered by the heat and humidity. This makes them susceptible to the garden pests which multiply in the summer, so some type of insect control may be necessary if you are to harvest an edible crop. They come in both bush and climbing (pole bean) varieties. The bush varieties are particularly easy to harvest as they poke their long pods in pairs up in the air above the plants.

Pigeon peas (*Cajanus cajan*), are a perennial pea which has been grown in India and the tropics for many years. They grow on a short-lived shrub, living about five years, which produces cowpea-type peas. They are harvested and shelled to be eaten fresh, or allowed to mature and stored as dry peas. They reseed readily and the volunteer plants you don't want make great mulch or compost. Each time you prune them, or when they die, they release nitrogen into the soil for the next crop. They don't like cold weather, but can be cut back to one to two feet and protected during freezes, or grown as an annual. New varieties have been developed which are more cold tolerant. I think that's the next thing I'm going to try.

All peas and beans need little if any fertilizer as they pull nitrogen from the air and convert it to useable nutrients. Applying fertilizer may decrease yield as it will produce more vines delaying the formation of pods. Field peas are great as cover crops, which is why I plant them. I don't apply insecticides, and consider myself fortunate if I am able to harvest a mess of peas as I did last year. If the bugs prevail, I cut the plants, dropping them in place and cover them with pine straw to compost, adding nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil for a fall crop.

More about growing peas and many other vegetables, including recommended varieties, can be found in the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>

Janis Piotrowski is a Master Gardener volunteer with the UF/Leon County Cooperative Extension Service. She hosts blogs about gardening and sustainable living in North Florida at www.northfloridavegheadz.blogspot.com and www.northfloridapermaculture.blogspot.com. For gardening questions, email us at Ask-A-Mastergardener@leoncountyfl.gov